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Harry Potter: Other People's Magic

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Author's Note:

This is a hobbyist fan-fiction, not a doctoral thesis. People over-analyzing it will waste their time and annoy the monkey (that's me). Enjoy the half-full glass.

CH01: Godrics Hollow

It all started with that hissing voice and the awful green light racing at him, trying to get at him through the bright, desperate cocoon of his mother's protection.

Harry's wide young eyes followed the familiar, deep blue bands of his mother's magic as they slowly twirled around him, dotted here and there with shining white motes like miniature stars. The rancid green cloud was trying to find its way past the bands to him; it roiled and twisted around his cocoon, testing, probing. A small tendril of green coiled up just in front of him through a momentary gap in the spiraling blue. His young perceptions focused on it with a mix of curiosity and dread. Harry extended a pudgy hand toward the twisting green smoke but stopped short as the wrongness of the thing became apparent to him. He recoiled from it even as the white motes hovering in his mother's spell began coalescing at the place where the green had entered. The brilliant specs gathered together and became impossibly bright for an instant, and the green light was thrown off, thrown back at the not-man in the corner of the room.

Blinking rapidly as his vision returned, Harry noticed the room was now lit from the doorway in flickering shades of orange and yellow. He was certain he was not alone in the room even though the not-man was gone; he could feel the chill of something on the floor, radiating cold and malice. He craned his neck over the edge of the crib to better see what he was sensing, when the chill struck him so strongly that he convulsed once and froze in place on animal instinct, hoping to be overlooked.

Rising from the floor two meters from the crib was an apparition of silver and black smoke, a tendril of malicious will curling slowly from side to side. A distorted face congealed at the front and turning slowly to look straight at him. Harry's eyes widened as it hovered forward, closing the gap towards him. He sat away from the bars of his crib and watched the nightmare slowly advance on him. He could see the eddies of black tendrils swirl away behind it as it glided forward, half a meter now. And then young Harry knew. He knew it wanted him, wanted his life for its own.

Terrified beyond reason, muscles tensing involuntarily, he watched the thing glide through the bars of his crib. It reared up briefly and dove right at him, into him, and he was engulfed in the black-silver eddies reaching over him, reaching inside of him as his eyes clouded over black. It found what it wanted and then a horrible wrenching, pulling sensation at his essence, trying to tear the magic and life out of him, to eject him and possess this body.

The fight or flight instinct, already primed, raged to life within Harry. He pulled back on his life and magic, his small blue ball of will and power. It had moved upwards from its usual resting spot in his chest, eddies of black trying to lift it out of his body altogether. So Harry pulled too. Unconsciously his small arms crossed in front of him as he pulled back hard on his magic, pulled with all the fear and emotion and will-to-live that he could feed to this basic human reaction: Mine!

The Shade was not pleased; its meal was not coming quietly. It pulled harder on the boy's magic and life, but the boy was stubborn; too young yet to be very strong, but also young enough to have no restraints on his fight-or-flight instincts.

And old enough, apparently, for accidental magic.

Harry's personal blue-and-turquoise aura, his own magic, was being stretched and torn by the black tendrils. It HURT. Harry needed to keep it, needed it to stay with him, so he...pushed on his own magic, willing it to change shape, to hide, to be where the blackness could not grab it. Maybe it was only possible because his fifteen-month-old mind did not know better, but he reshaped his magic, willing it to turn inside-out. With a rolling, parting sensation his normally spherical magical essence disappeared. The black tendrils closed around nothing, for there was nothing to latch onto. Where had the boy's magic gone? This angered the Shade beyond all thought, and it pummeled through and around the boy for a heart-stopping half minute.

It ceased and fled only when another figure entered the room, wand aloft. A bespectacled old man wearing a waist-length beard and embroidered purple robes watched the Shade ascend through the ceiling before warily approaching the crib. When he saw Harry lying still face-down in the crib, he feared the worst; all three lost. He placed his aged hand on Harry's back and nearly wilted with relief; the breathing was shallow but fast. Dumbledore's shoulders fell as his head tilted back and his eyes closed with commingled pain, joy and relief; the boy was alive. He had not yet failed completely to protect those under his care.

A sound of timbers shifting and then falling pulled Dumbledore back to the present. The crackle of flames was omnipresent now; the house was lost. He carefully lifted the boy from the crib, assuming him to have been peacefully asleep all this time. That notion shattered as he got a good look at the boy; the angry curse scar over his right eye hinted at what must have been responsible for the pile of robes and wand now being singed on the floor. The scar however was not the most surprising thing about the boy. Dumbledore flinched in recognition as he perceived the boy was in fact screaming, or rather attempting to, but could no longer make a sound. His eyes closed for a moment in some surfeit of sympathy, and apology.

Dumbledore placed his hand on the boy's head and whispered "Dormius Harry, dormius. Sleep now." A flutter of spellwork washed over him and Harry relaxed rapidly, his breathing slowing as he quickly drifted off. Dumbledore tucked the child into his shoulder with one hand. With the other and drew his wand and waved a pack spell

at the discarded robe and wand on the floor. Another flick had the resulting bundle floating beside him.

Aware of the now entrenched fire, Albus quickly scanned the room for clues as to what transpired here this night. He'd passed James Potter's remains on the steps as he entered; the scorched walls of the living room told of the short, one-sided battle there. Lilly Potter's corpse lay at the far end of the baby's room, half buried under a collapsed changing table, hand outstretched toward the crib even in death. The sight of it threatened to break Albus' tenuous emotional control; Two more of his friends, his protege, gone.

But how had the boy survived the curse? And what of the Shade? Dumbledore's swirling thoughts were sidetracked by a shout from the driveway. With a frown, the greatest wizard alive clutched the boy firmly to him and apparated away.

## CH02 : Aftermath

A recognizable pressure wave preceded the appearance of Dumbledore arriving on the front lawn of his burning cottage in Godric's Hollow. The fire had claimed most of the first floor and was rapidly consuming the upstairs as well.

Glancing around, Dumbledore noted that several members of the Order were attempting to contain the fire, and he presumed the one covered body was that of James Potter. Nodding to himself, he vanished the windows in the child's room and carefully summoned Lily's body to rest next to that of her husband. To his surprise he observed one Sirius Black stumble out of the hotly burning dwelling, his boots literally smoking, and dispel a breathing charm as he limped rapidly towards them.

"Albus! What can we... is that Harry?"

Dumbledore nodded at him. "Alive. Sleeping."

"Oh, thank the Gods. Thank Merlin..." muttered Sirius as he placed a soot-covered hand on Harry's back.

They shared a long look, broken by Sirius' glance and the corpses of his two friends. "This. Should. Not. Have. Happened!"

"Indeed not. The Potters were betrayed," Dumbledore intoned heavily. "Voldemort himself was here this night. However the Fidelus is still active. Tom must have been told the secret by one who knew."

Another shared glance, and Sirius growled a single murderous word: "Peter."

Dumbledore caught Sirius' eyes over the top of his spectacles. "Find him, Sirius."

A nod, and Sirius Black turned and disappeared on the spot. He would be as surprised and saddened as anyone, when the world next heard of Sirius Black. Dumbledore stood staring at the remnants of his cottage, their hideout, as the fire was quelled. Apparently some portion of the house had been preserved by timely spellwork on the part of the Order. Minerva appeared at his side; he had not heard her approach. Her brogue was thickened by smoke and fatigue.

"Young Harry survived then?"

"Indeed. But not unharmed." Albus lowered his arm slightly to allow Minerva to see the lightning scar, still red and ugly, marring the sleeping boy's forehead.

"Is that...how is that possible?" Minerva asked in a hushed voice.

"I honestly do not know. I have some theories that may explain it, but at the moment I do not know how he survived Tom's curse."

"And what of You Know Who?" she asked.

"I believe he was destroyed tonight when the curse rebounded on him."

"...Truly?"

"It appears so. His wand and robes were abandoned inside. Tom would not willingly leave his wand behind," Albus replied.

She paused, somewhat shocked. "Then...it's over, Albus? The war is over?" There was something approaching hope in her voice that suddenly made Albus very, very tired.

"I believe that it soon will be, yes. Tom's forces will not fight on without him."

"It's a miracle, then," Minerva said. "And a tragedy," she added thickly, face turned towards the former Potters.

"Indeed, Minerva. So many have paid for peace, with blood. This little one has given us a chance for peace. We must seize the opportunity."

"And what of Harry?" She asked.

"If you would be so kind as to finish securing the scene here, I want to have Poppy look him over."

Minerva hesitated for a moment, then nodded. "Very well, Albus."

They shared a long look which sufficed for goodbye, and Minerva strode away towards the side of the ruined cottage. Dumbledore looked up at the night sky, inhaled slowly, and whistled seven particular notes. Within seconds, a small red star appeared some distance overhead and rapidly grew into a meter wide ring of flame, brilliant against the night sky. The ring collapsed into an avian form, a raptor the color of sunset with a two meter wingspan and an elaborate tail. The bird looped once and settled on Dumbledore's other shoulder with a three note greeting.

"Hello, Fawkes. The infirmary, please."

A small implosion of flame marked their arrival in Hogwarts Infirmary. Fawkes was wise enough to minimize the pyrotechnics indoors. Poppy Pomfrey scuttled out of her office, looking a bit put out at nearly three AM. Four other infirmary beds were occupied at the moment.

"Some privacy, if you would, Poppy," Dumbledore requested.

"Is that a child? ... very well, over here then Albus," said Poppy. They proceeded into a curtained-off area where Poppy transfigured a high table with sideboards appropriate to the task.

"Let's see him, then."

Albus gingerly handed over his sleeping charge to the nurse. She promptly gasped at the curse scar marring his forehead. "Is this... ?" She stammered.

"Apparently. He somehow survived Tom's killing curse. And a subsequent possession attack from a Shade. I've no idea how," Albus replied.

Poppy gaped for a few seconds before her professionalism took over and she began her routine of diagnostic spells. The first two, for physical health, showed fairly normal.

"Poor thing, he's cried himself hoarse." Albus did not correct her presumption. Poppy ran her wand over his throat and chest for a moment.

"There's that mended. Now, let's look at your magic, shall we?" Poppy circled her wand above Harry's head and incanted the charm for assessing the health of a patient's magical essence. A nimbus of silver light surrounded Harry for a moment, and then turned deep ruby color.

Both adults frowned. "His magical essence is nearly exhausted, Albus. And very small to boot; practically non-existent, in fact. It's hard to say whether this is due to surviving the curse, or a birth condition. His essence will recover in time, but it's so weak, he may well be a squib."

Dumbledore nodded but said nothing more than "Thank you, Poppy."

They were interrupted by the floo chime indicating a call. Minerva's disembodied voice floated over to them with the query "Albus? Do you have a moment please?"

"Excuse me please, Poppy. I shall return momentarily."

Albus glided off towards the floo while Poppy changed and redressed her charge. "That's better. Let's have a look at you, then, young man. Enervate."

The boy's eyes shot open in fear and shock, locking with Poppy's smiling ones after rapidly scanning the room. His eyes were unmistakably green, with the unsettling, momentary presence of blue lightning in the pupils. He stilled and stared at Poppy as she smiled back at him. She knew those eyes very well indeed. This was Lily's boy, Harry Potter. Harry, for his part, was the least unhappy he'd been all night. The nice lady in the hat was smiling at him. His throat didn't hurt. His chest still ached a bit, and his forehead itched something fierce, but overall, not so bad.

"Hello, Harry" Poppy whispered to him. He stared back.

Why was he here alone? Where were his parents? Pomfrey frowned to herself at the implications. She shook her head, made a 'tsk' and ran the magic health indicator spell again. She really didn't want Lily's boy to be a squib, if she could help it. There were regimens... Just then, and not for the last time, something very odd happened around Harry Potter. As the silver nimbus of the diagnostic spell surrounded Harry, it triggered a flashback of the Shade surrounding him. While it didn't feel quite the same to Harry, he had just been brutalized by a glowing silver light and that was not going to happen again.

As the diagnostic spell settled into him to touch his essence, Harry shuddered, and Pulled back with his magic once again. He Pulled for all he was worth. The spell immediately shut down, drained of its magic. The infant bed under him reverted to a simple lunch tray, its transfiguration exhausted as the magic ran out. The curls fell out of Poppy's hair, which now hung strait to her shoulders. The magical floating light overhead dimmed dramatically and wobbled away, listing badly to one side. So did the ones over the adjoining beds. Harry felt the magic rush into him, not needing words even to understand it, and allowed it to settle naturally into where his own used to sit. He stopped Pulling, and giggled at the shocked face of one Poppy Pomfrey.

"Oooh, you little stinker, you. It took me an hour to get my hair right this morning!" Poppy was laughing as she said it though, and broke



out into a half grin immediately after. "You are going to be trouble, I can just tell."

A short time later, Dumbledore returned to collect Harry, only to find the boy staring back at him over Poppy's shoulder as she stirred a potion on the sideboard. Hoping for the best, Albus met Harry's stare and whispered "legilimens". The memories of the night played back in disorienting swaths of sound and sensation. Harry clearly perceived magic differently, more tangibly, than any wizard Albus had heard of. Perhaps it was something more prevalent in children. The vision of the blue, spiraling protections stopping the green light was a revelation to Albus. To watch the death curse blocked and reflected was something he never believed possible. But the source, what was the source? That deep blue light was the key. As Harry's memory self turned his head, Albus observed a toy elephant in the crib with a identical deep blue halo, but much smaller; a charmed toy, probably.

The memory of the Shade was terrifying, even for an adult. Or perhaps more so for an adult, Albus speculated, knowing what was coming to pass. He watched from Harry's perspective as the Shade advanced on him, plunged into him and began coiling tentacles into his magical essence. To see young Harry's small blue magical essence begin to emerge from his chest, then be pulled back again, gave even Dumbledore a moment of eye widening, breath catching fear. To have your magic taken -stolen, was a fate dreaded by any sane witch or wizard. How had this boy prevailed?

Oddly, Dumbledore felt his legilimens spell begin to fail, breaking down. What he failed to notice was the unhappy look on Harry's face at reliving the difficult memory. Dumbledore ended the deflating spell and dismissed it as a lapse in his own concentration due to fatigue. Staying up past three in the morning was best left to those under a hundred and twenty.

Albus closed his eyes and reasoned; a skill apparently rare in wizarddom. Old Magick, with a sentient spell guarding the boy; deep blue light in the shield. Deep blue light on the toy. Protective parents, judicious about charmed objects near the boy. Which means that one of them probably charmed the toy themselves: James or Lily. James or Lily... either could charm a toy, but of the two, only Lily had the intellect and skill to research and rediscover such a shield. James would act first and think later; Lily was the opposite. An old

spell, her life to save his. What mother would do less for her son? Yes. Lily. This Old Magick would persist for Harry, then, through his mother's blood: the sister, Petunia. Muggle, married, plain. Safe. Away from Tom's minions. Away from the spotlight. A normal childhood for this Boy Who Lived. Albus could give him that. He blinked, sighed, and straightened himself up.

"Everything all right, Poppy?"

She turned at his question. "Oh yes, I suspect Mr Potter here will be making a full recovery," she replied with a smile in her voice.

"Excellent. I believe it's time he met his new family."

"What do you...oh, no, Albus, tell me it's not true?"

"Regretfully I cannot. James and Lilly are gone. Voldemort attacked Godric's Hollow this evening."

Poppy was silent for a long moment, eyes closed in anguished acceptance. She met Albus with glistening eyes and asked "Where is he to go?"

"I am considering placing him with Lilly's sister. I believe he would be safest there," Albus replied.

"Oh, dear." A long pause, then "I suppose they are his closest family," she replied, handing over a freshly conjured bassinet with Harry aboard.

"Indeed, Poppy, indeed." Dumbledore accepted the bassinet, stepped back three paces, and whistled seven particular notes. Fawkes the phoenix appeared in a displacement of hot air above the Headmaster, who grabbed his tail and was immediately gone in a crackle of flame.

Author's Note: Harry's childhood at the Dursley's mostly follows cannon, with a few twists as told below.

CH03: Privet Drive, part 1

Harry Potter was six years old, and lived in a cupboard under the stairs at Number Four Privet Drive, Little Winging, Surrey. Harry

Potter saw things no one else did, but he learned to keep that to himself after his Uncle had cuffed him hard about the head, locked him in for two days, and admonished him loudly to "stop talking about that freakishness."

Harry wondered what THEY saw when they looked at other people. He saw faintly glowing clouds around nearly everything- everything alive, anyway. Even the electric plugs in the house vibrated red in his vision; not the soothing silver-blue of living things, but radiant none the less; even the power lines within the walls and above the street pulsed red. Everything sang to Harry's eyes. Not that he could see all that well, mind you, as the drugstore eyeglasses he'd been given didn't fit all that well, and didn't do much to correct his nearsightedness.

A sharp rap at the door and his aunt's voice roused him. "Start the breakfast, child." She was not cold to him, precisely, but certainly not warm either. Unlike the other two, who were prone to hit him at any excuse.

"Yes, Aunt Petunia."

Harry trudged into the kitchen, hiking up the over large castoff pants as he went. They were nearly double his size, rolled up twice at the cuffs. He went to the fridge and pulled out a carton of eggs, rashers of bacon, bread, butter, and all the standard fare to feed six, or rather Dudley and Vernon, plus Petunia. The eggs always unsettled him a bit, being sort of alive, but he ignored it so as not to attract further correction from his Aunt. She supervised from the table while he worked, as she did most mornings. She had opted for half a grapefruit today, and sat down to slice it as Harry set about cooking bacon and mountains of toast. He was just flipping his third panful of bacon when he heard his aunt give a small shout.

"Oh! ... Ruddy dull knife gouged me!" She exclaimed, annoyed and surprised at the freely flowing wound. He turned his head to see her holding one hand in a kitchen towel, the knife discarded on the table as she clenched one hand over the other. He pushed the pan off the flame and stepped over to his aunt as she examined the wound.

Harry could see her aliveness, the usually diffuse cloud around her, thick and bright around the wound, leaking radiance from the sizable gash on her second finger.

"That's a stitch or three, for sure," she announced to the room. Harry Potter made a decision and did something unusual, then, and offered unsolicited commentary to one of his relatives.

"I...I can fix that, if you'd like, Aunt Petunia. It won't hurt."

She looked at him as if he'd been speaking Chinese, but then her brow furrowed as she thought of the things her sister used to be capable of.

"I'd rather not visit the clinic. You're certain you can mend it?" She asked him.

"Yes, I've mended myself loads of times after..." - Harry did not complete his original sentence, 'after Dudley's friends were done with me'- but said rather, "...after I got hurt. If you want me to?"

She stared at him for a moment, then frowned and offered her still wrapped hand. "Alright, go on then, quickly before Vernon sees."

Harry reached out and slowly moved the towel aside to better see the wound. The leaking radiance was a bit unsettling. He hovered the first two fingers of his right hand over the wound and pushed a bit of his own energy into his fingertips. He'd had ample opportunity to practice this part, thanks to Dudley's sidekick Piers and his penchant for slashing at Harry with house keys. Harry allowed the tiny field of turquoise energy to flow thickly downwards from his fingertips onto the wound. His aunt vocalized a tiny chirp when the blue light met her skin. Harry drew his two fingers slowly down the length of the wound, sealing it and locking the radiance in once again. He drew his hand away as he caught his aunt's eyes.

"All done." She lifted the hand to inspect it. The wound was indeed closed, not even a scar.

"That's...remarkable. Thank you, Harry." She rarely used his proper name, and usually only when angry with him. Today was different, and they both sensed it. She had not seen the magic, of course, but she had certainly felt it, like strong sunshine for just a moment, right there on her hand. It felt like touching a ringing bell, and sunshine. Or both, put together. They stood there for a few seconds, each perceiving the shift in frequency of their relationship. She had

acknowledged his specialness without ridicule. But she had a role to play in this household, and nothing was to jeopardize that.

Petunia met his eyes for a moment. Her dead sister's eyes looked back at her, and all of the mental gates dropped down as quickly as they had opened.

"Best finish with the bacon, Harry. Vernon will be down any minute." Her voice was quiet and a little sad. His was no less so.

"Yes, Aunt Petunia."

#### CH04: Privet Drive, pt 2 (Choose Life)

Harry Potter was now ten years old and still lived in a cupboard under the stairs at Number Four Privet Drive, Surrey. Very little had changed within the family dynamic at Privet Drive. Dudley was still obese, still spoiled, and still captained his little gang of thugs in frequent bouts of Harry Hunting. Vernon was Vernon: loud, thick, petty, and mean because he could be. Petunia however was slightly better to Harry than the Whale and the Walrus. Harry suspected this was because after the kitchen conversation a few years back, some part of her acknowledged that the specialness in him was not freakishness, although she could not be seen to admit as much. So they had tentative understanding, which was cemented one April afternoon when she called him from the cupboard out to the back yard.

She was kneeling just in front of the rightmost flower-bed, evidently planting geraniums. Harry was not allowed to actually plant flowers, only to weed. By hand. He didn't mind awfully through, everything here was radiant in its own way, and alive. He could touch that radiance, and Pull from it, just a bit, if he concentrated. Petunia called him over, and as he neared, he noticed that before her on the ground, protected under her gloved fingers, was a small yellow-streaked songbird. Petunia looked distressed. She liked birds, as far as Harry knew. His chores certainly included the frequent refilling of the the bird bath & feeder.

Somewhat tremulously, Petunia said "Harry, I ... this Siskin has broken its neck. I heard it hit the glass a moment ago, scared me half to death!"

He met her eyes, waiting. He could see the faint purple nimbus through her gloved fingers, wavering, fluttering against the faint blue-white radiance surrounding his Aunt. He truly did not know if she wanted him to dispose of it; he wasn't sure he could do that... But he was saved from that thought when she spoke again.

"Do you think you could ...fix...it ? Heal it, I mean?"

Harry bit his lip and considered the size of the bird, the thickness of the bones involved. Healing his own broken arm had taken hours and left him exhausted for days afterward. He'll not make that mistake with Dudley's gang again. But the bird was small, and innocent. It breathed weakly against Petunia's fingers. Harry closed his eyes for moment, then looked to his aunt.

"I think so, Aunt Petunia."

"Come here, then. It will surely die, otherwise."

Harry knelt down just in front of his aunt, knees almost touching, the bird still held down gently by Petunia. They had rarely been this close, ever. "I'll have to hold it, I think."

Carefully Petunia maneuvered the bird into Harry's hands while supporting the head. She could feel the rapid, gasping breath of the frightened bird. Harry cradled it in his palms with his fingertips supporting the fragile neck. The feathers were soft and warm on his hands, but the radiance was failing now, guttering like a spent candle.

"She's nearly gone... it's a female, by the way; young," Harry said quietly.

Not for the last time, something very odd happened around Harry Potter. His last observation, made offhandedly, clearly touched an emotion in his aunt that he had literally never seen before. She choked back a quiet sob, causing Harry to lift his eyes to hers as he sat a bit more upright. She sat back also, and Harry observed two tear tracks shining on her cheeks as she raised her eyes to him. Clearly this was about more than the bird to her. Harry was slightly mystified by her then, seeing depths to her she'd always kept hidden. Had he been older, he might have recognized the parallels to her

own life, and her sister's. But he understood death well enough by now, watching radiance leak away from everything- from the weeds he pulled, from the fruit he picked, from a squashed spider. From everything, really. Anything that lived, could die. For him it was a constant, visible reminder of the transience of life.

Her voice brought him back. "Please, Harry..." she said, half plea and half prayer, hands grasped before her unconsciously. Sensing this moment between them would not last, seeing the window for what it was, Harry met her eyes and nodded.

Closing his eyes, Harry focused his senses down, feeling the bird's energy. This much came easily to him now. He touched its radiance with his own turquoise magic, and the fluttering receded. Harry thought for a moment about what he could say to his aunt that would matter, that would show her that he was not just the freak they branded him. He wanted her to really see HIM, just once. And it should be memorable. Where the words came from exactly, he didn't know, but they whispered themselves to him as soon as he understood he wanted them.

With a breath, Harry sought downwards with his small blue magic, down below him and spreading out into the grass around him. He could feel the radiance in the grass itself, and below; the bulbs, the tree roots, the earth itself. He envisioned what he wanted, and he pulled that radiance up, using his magic as a conduit, out through his hands and into the bird. All the weeks of stored sunlight in the grass, the bacteria in the soil, all of the life in a circle underneath Harry...changed. It moved, and flowed into him. He felt it tangibly moving up through him, through his chest, being funneled by his magic down his arms, through his hands and into the bird. To him it was like being inside a symphony. He vaguely heard Petunia gasp as he used his slight turquoise magic to shape the flood of Radiance into something like the bird's frequency-color. The Siskin's own nimbus stabilized and began to intensify as Harry directed the flow specifically to the fragile neck bones. He bowed his head over the bird, focusing golden radiance and little flecks of his blue magic into the Siskin: neck; shoulder; rib. Heal.

Petunia, for her part, was rather stunned. Her nephew was radiating warmth like late August sunshine, like a sunset. It felt...good. Odd, but good. He seemed... brighter, somehow, crisper, as the air vibrated around him. And was he...yes, his hands were actually

glowing, lit from within as a faint white-yellow nimbus surrounded his hands and the bird. A breath later, it tilted its head to look at her. To her mind, Petunia was seeing a miracle; and maybe she was.

The glow increased, and Harry's head lifted. After a pause, he opened his eyes, looked into hers and said in a curiously resonant voice:

"For you, Petunia. Life from death. Now: Live!"

And with those words he tossed the bird into the sky. She watched it spread its wings, lift its head with its not-broken neck, and sing four clear notes as it disappeared over the hedge. More tears tracked down her face. Life from death, indeed. She stared after the bird for a moment more, then wiped her eyes on her sleeve and glanced back to her extraordinary nephew.

Whatever he was doing, it had run its course. He looked...small...again, ordinary, sitting there in Dudley's old things. And he was swaying.

"Ugh. Tired." he mumbled. He tipped forward and very nearly collapsed; only her hand on his shoulder stopped him from falling on her.

"Harry?"

He inhaled slowly and said "I'm okay, Aunt Petunia. But, I need to eat."

She shook her head, wiped her eyes once more, and made to stand up. "Alright, come along then, and we'll get you some lunch."

She looked back to see Harry stand cautiously, wobble a bit, and right himself to shuffle along behind. She did not comment on the circle of yellowed, wilted grass in the lawn where Harry had been kneeling, or the wilted flowers on one side of the rosebush nearest that spot. But she did hear a Siskin singing.

/Authors Note : Credit where credit is due: The Radiance concept is not mine, I stole it shamelessly from GreenGecko and her brilliant story Revolution. Read it here on FF. I have expanded on the idea for my own ends. /



## CH05: As the seventh month dies...

Harry Potter was now ten years, eleven months and eighteen days old, and still lived in a cupboard under the stairs at Number Four Privet Drive. His aunt Petunia had been significantly better to him since the events in April. She could not be seen to be doing so, of course, but she was clever enough to make sure Vernon never missed the occasional bit of pocket money, and a proper Lunch on weekdays could be explained away as another increase in Dudley's appetite. She also had taken to 'loaning' Harry out to Ms Figg for additional 'chores', of which Vernon heartily approved. Her tacit agreement with Harry was that he always reported being worked hard, did his actual chores as required, and frequently got half a day to himself to do as he pleased. Having fairly modest expectations by this point, Harry was not unappreciative of these improvements. A little extra food, time and money went a long way for a ten year old boy.

Figuring out he could fry the TV on Dudley's video game console, which Harry never got to see, much less try, by pushing a bit of energy at it through the wall was the highlight of Harry's whole summer. He could move electricity around a bit now, but it stung like wasps if he Pulled from it. He could push it around a bit instead, make it go where he wanted, but it was lazy and preferred staying in the wires. So mostly he just left it alone. His blue magic, though, with that he could short electricity right out; too bad he had so little of it.

It was a warm summer afternoon, a Tuesday, and he was walking back from the grocery with another sack of groceries when not for the last time, something very odd happened to Harry Potter. A young woman was standing in the crowd at the corner waiting for the light as he approached. Her hair was a truly brilliant bubblegum pink, spiked, and waving in the breeze. Faded black jeans, boots and a leather jacket over a tee completed the look. She was possibly the coolest girl he had ever seen. She eyed Harry as he came to a stop alongside her.

Harry glanced at her, blushed, and then promptly looked straight ahead, although he could not keep his eyes from creeping as far right as possible to stare at her. Harry concluded he must be seeing things. He was pretty sure she could tell he was staring out of the corner of his eye, but he couldn't help it. This girl's nimbus was something totally beyond his experience. He'd mostly inured himself

to his visions of people's energy-clouds: the injuries, the diseases, that guy with the tapeworm, even the phantom limbs didn't shock him any more. But this girl's energy cloud was...Well; it was something completely different. Not entirely human, in his limited experience. Whereas most people and animals had simple 'clouds' or halos around their forms, hers was like a rippling pink plastic wrap covering her from head to toe, with a great, glowing bell in the middle, chiming with her heartbeat. It was mesmerizing, so much so that he missed the changing of the stoplight as everyone else stepped around him.

"Wotcher!" she said to him, when he didn't move. Neither had she. Laughing at him, she stuck out her hand and said one word, "Tonks."

Wide eyed, Harry shook her hand and replied, "Harry."

Her eyes drifted up to his fringe and the scar beneath. She smiled a full smile at him, and said "See you around, Harry."

Having been doubly surprised by (a) having a seriously cool girl talk to him, and (b) having seen a living energy so completely unique, Harry was very much in brain lock, and took a full five seconds to respond to her retreating form with a mumbled "...yeah...ok...". It took him another five seconds to remember to walk.

It was later that day that Harry decided he needed to know more people like her, whatever that meant. He headed back to library after dinner, five blocks down and three over. The Dursleys wouldn't sponsor him for a card, but he could still read the books there at the library, so that's what he did.

Like any ten year old boy, the comic books got read first and often. But Harry had other things he wanted to know, about the things apparently only he saw when he looked at people or animals. Or wall plugs, for that matter. So he thumbed a book on human biology, which caused him to look up the healing process in a medical reference. He honestly didn't understand all of it, but it did make reference to something called 'acu-puncture' which claimed to direct 'healing energies'. Since that was the closest reference yet to what he was after, he asked the librarian for more books, and set to reading about acupuncture, Qi, and how energy was believed to move around the body. Some of it was confirmed by his own

experience, but some of it was just bollocks. Harry could move the energy inside him around with a thought; why would you use needles for that?

Feeling a bit stalled with the biology theory, Harry spent a few afternoons reading about electricity and magnets. Something struck him, then, about how a battery holds the charge -the energy - but only when the energy flows from one point to another does something actually happen. The lights go on when you close the switch, allowing the current to flow through the bulb. For Harry it was sort of obvious, as he could literally see it happening. But now he understood why, and that made all the difference. He made the distinction between the current, or energy, and the circuit that enabled that energy to flow. That's what he was, Harry decided, a human circuit. He could move energy from one place to another. He could be Circuit Man, which sounded pretty cool to a ten year old who liked comic books.

"Alright, young man; time to wrap it up for today," announced the assistant librarian as she began collecting books from the adjacent table. She knew him on sight by now: unfailingly polite, questionable clothes, brilliant green eyes.

"We're closing in ten minutes. Oh, and you should try to finish your Spiderman there by tomorrow at the latest."

Harry glanced up from his favorite comic book. "What do you mean?" he asked, holding the book to himself protectively.

She grinned at him. "Relax, I just meant that the new one will be here on Monday. Tomorrow's the 31st, you know."

"Oh. Right. Thanks," he offered to her, and a moment later, in sotto voice,

"...Happy birthday to me. I hope eleven's not this boring."

CH06: Letters, Giants and Magic

Harry Potter was now eleven years old, and indeed still lived in a cupboard under the stairs at number four Privet Drive.

"Get the post, boy." The boy in question was currently standing at the sink drying the last of the breakfast dishes.

"Yes, Uncle Vernon," came the careful reply. Harry trudged to the front door and retrieved a small pile of post from the floor just inside. He began to stack the post neatly for delivery to his uncle. That's when he noticed that he'd got a letter. An actual letter was addressed to him, personally. And it was no ordinary letter; it was on unusually textured stock, and apparently addressed by hand - in script. Nobody Harry knew wrote in script. But it was meant for him, of that there was no doubt: Harry Potter, the Cupboard under the Stairs, etc. He stuck it under his arm and marched into the kitchen to deliver the remaining post to Vernon. He'd just deposited it next to his uncle when Dudley said in a joyful tattle, "Dad, Harry's got a letter!"

This prompted a loud but brief argument followed by Harry being ordered to read the letter aloud. He did so, up until reaching the words "witchcraft and wizardry", which caused uncle Vernon to turn a vivid shade of puce, snatch the letter back from him, and tear it to shreds. He cuffed Harry smartly on the head while shouting at him, red faced and spittle flying, that "there was no such thing as magic and he did want that freakishness mentioned in his house EVER AGAIN.

Petunia blanched and Dudley was giggling as Vernon hauled Harry up by the collar, marched him into the hall, threw him bodily into the cupboard, and locked the door. "Do NOT make a sound for the rest of the day if you want to eat tonight, BOY!"

So Harry didn't. He sat there in the near-dark on a threadbare crib mattress, listening to the sounds creep under the door, as usual. He'd lost count of how many times they'd locked him in. At least he got breakfast, sort of.

Harry had a lot to think about, anyway, and this gave him time to do so. Could it be true? Was he not just a freak, but a wizard? Is that why he saw things no one else could? Is that why he could move energy around just by thinking about it? Was the pink-haired girl a witch? Could he really go to school to learn magic? Could he even do magic? Or just other things? Some hours later, he heard Vernon shouting about "ruddy owls" and "another blasted letter," and "freakishness in his house."

The next few days were the most surreal and interesting of Harry Potter's young life. He saw hundreds of identical magical letters arrive, which immensely frustrated Vernon and greatly amused Harry. Dozens of apparently magical owls, owls! had arrived, delivering more. But Vernon was as stubborn as he was thick. When he reached his limit, he packed them all off to some remote island off the coast, in the midst of a storm no less.

And then, a giant came visiting.

He certainly looked like a giant to Harry, and mightily disliked Vernon, which made him okay in Harry's book even before he ever spoke to Harry. Hagrid's energy-aura was even bigger than he was, and it made Harry smile just seeing it. The deep tan and blue swirls hovering around the man reminded Harry of the nimbus around a Clydesdale; which made some kind of sense, really. The birthday cake sealed the deal; he'd be Hagrid's friend for life. To be told he was a Wizard, and hear Vernon and Petunia confess then knew all along, and get his first ever actual birthday cake, and watch Dudley get a tail; it all seemed like the tip of some huge roller coaster, and he was ready to ride it.

Hagrid took him to London the next day, and as he approached a run down looking pub he learned was called the Leaky Cauldron, Harry knew his world was about to change. To the normal human eye, the place was just a tiny, grubby looking pub; in fact most passers-by didn't seem to even notice it, and jumped to the next storefront. But to Harry...the whole place practically glowed. The walls had a faint gold-orange haze over them, much stronger at the doors and windows. He didn't really have time to look around inside, as Hagrid was marching him quickly out to the back alley. The glowing bricks should have tipped him off, really... normal walls don't luminesce that way. Hagrid opened the door to Diagon Alley, and Harry was sure he was actually looking into a world of strobing neon clouds. He flinched, drawing a glance from Hagrid. Harry blinked half a dozen times, and acting on instinct moved some of his own blue magic into his eyes, a little trick he had learned to increase his low light vision. He reversed the polarity of his usual trick, added a bit more power, and that toned things down to where he could see more or less normally.

"I'm okay... it's just...amazing!"

"Aye, Harry! That it is. Welcome to Diagon Alley!"

They began their trek to Gringott's. Harry was literally gaping at the energies he saw pouring off the people walking by. One man sat casually eating while birdlike cloud forms darted around him constantly. A woman walked by with a light show around her like a miniature lightning storm; another looked like she was wearing a strobing candy cane. So much energy! He'd never seen anything like it. Hagrid's voice pulled him out of his trance.

"Alright, Harry?"

Distractedly, Harry replied "Uh... yes, sir. It's just..." and here Harry wondered for a moment if seeing energy was normal for wizards, or if he was an oddball in this world, too. Harry stopped walking and looked up at Hagrid, who stopped to glance back at him.

"Hagrid... does magic glow?"

"Well, sure, I mean, a strong spell can leave a trail like a comet. Why ya askin'?"

Harry's heart broke a little, right then. He wasn't normal for this world, either, apparently. He composed his expression and returned Hagrid's glance.

"No reason, just curious I guess," Harry supplied in the careful tone he used with uncle Vernon.

"You'll be seein' plenty o' that soon enough at Hogwarts, Harry. Don't you worry!"

They tromped on towards Gringotts, where Harry saw his first Goblin, all of whom had spiny, green-gold auras around them. Harry thought they looked like a bunch of cactus. Finding out he was not in fact poor was rather a shock, but the cart ride was about the coolest thing Harry had ever done. Having completed their banking, it was time for supplies. First things first; a wizard needs a wand.

Hagrid led him into Ollivander's, and Harry's jaw promptly swung open again. Amidst the boxes upon boxes of wands, tiny motes of color and light hovered everywhere, swirling gently in some unseen

breeze. And gliding through them he could make out the top of a human-shaped cloud-form full of swirling silver stars, like comets. The aura was tall and wide, bigger even than Hagrid. As the vibrant cloud neared, Harry was convinced he could actually hear it humming; a deep, gentle vibration like an immense tuning fork, or a massive xylophone. When he arrived, the mild old man at the center of cloud looked nothing like what Harry was expecting. Harry collected himself, stopped gaping, and gave this man his full attention.

"Ah, yes. I thought I might be seeing you soon, Mr. Potter," Ollivander said, his pale silver eyes studying Harry intently. Harry wondered what you could see with eyes like that. Ollivander proceeded to recite the history of Harry's parents' wands as he collected boxed wands for Harry to try.

Gliding back to counter, Ollivander intoned, "The wand chooses the wizard, Mister Potter. So let's see what works for you, hmm?"

They must have tried thirty at least forty wands over the next hour, and Ollivander showed no signs of slowing. In fact he seemed to be enjoying himself, trying to solve the puzzle young Harry presented. After another dozen wands were placed into and quickly snatched from his hands, Harry asked very interesting question.

"Sir... do you have any wands where the, uh, donors are still alive?"

Ollivander froze in perfect stillness, pausing in a way that normal humans simply can't. Every mote of magic hovering in the shop slowed its motion and froze in place. Even the deep, even chime of Ollivander's magic quieted to silence for a beat. Both men were staring at Harry now, but he was getting used to that.

"Er, what was that, Mr. Potter?"

"I was wondering if you had any wands made from bits of things that are still alive. Sir. And preferably...blue," Harry said. Ollivander's only response was a single raised eyebrow. The deep chime slowly started up again. All the magic motes pulsed once, then started slowly swaying once more.

"Blue," Ollivander echoed.

"Blue," Harry confirmed. "My magic is blue. And turquoise, actually."

"Hmmm...blue. And still living. You are a most interesting case, Mr Potter. ...I wonder..."

Ollivander glided away into the shop's back room and returned with short section of an evergreen branch roughly the diameter of a shovel handle. It still bore a few twigs and bit of sap at one end.

"Take ahold of this, Mr Potter, and tell me what you feel," Ollivander commanded. Hagrid leaned forward, intrigued.

Harry did as he was bidden, and closed his hand around the clean end of the branch presented to him. As soon as his hand closed around it, Harry knew the tree that had provided this branch was still alive. How he knew this he could not say, but the wood felt alive to his touch. A gentle sky blue nimbus enveloped the branch.

"This is it," Harry said with a grin. Glancing at the needles, he added, "blue spruce, I presume, sir?"

Ollivander returned Harry's grin, and for a second looked half his age. "Indeed, Mr. Potter. I harvested that branch yesterday evening from a spruce that grows in my own front yard. It survived being struck by lightning, you know, although it has a distinctive..." - Ollivander's gaze tilted, "...scar. How curious..."

Harry blinked slowly, then said "Erm, Right. I presume I can't just wave a branch around in class, so..."

Ollivander was clearly deep in thought. "What? ...Oh, quite right, Mr. Potter, quite right indeed. We'll need to find your wand a core, then. Let me see..."

He glided back and forth to his workshop several more times with various bits of magical creatures, all of them from beings still living: Unicorn hair, snake venom, a bit of Griffin claw, manticores mane, and a scale from a living dragon. Harry knew they were all connected to still-living beings, but none of them resonated strongly with him. Finally, Ollivander returned with a long, flat box holding an orderly row of feathers of various types, colors and sizes.



"Run your hand above these, Mister Potter, and see what you might feel," Ollivander instructed.

Harry did so, and right away the first one, a midnight black feather, felt wrong and vaguely nauseating to him. Harry could see faint black tendrils leeching off that particular feather, so he quickly moved on to an iridescent green feather that felt mildly amused at him. The third one, long and off-white, gave him nothing. The fourth one, a shocking red specimen, nearly glowed as his hand approached. When he carefully picked it up, it did in fact glow with a gentle gold nimbus. He met Ollivander's eyes and nodded. He handed the feather gently to the old man, who took it from him with reverence.

"Curious... very, very curious..." The old man paused.

"I know every wand I ever made, Mister Potter, and how they were crafted. The wand that gave you that scar carried a phoenix feather. That same phoenix gave just one more feather, which you have just chosen.

That news sort of crept Harry out, but in for a penny, in for a pound. "But this phoenix is still alive, sir?"

"Fawkes is Dumbledore's phoenix, Harry. 'E lives up at Hogwarts," Hagrid supplied

"Oh. Right. So...now what?" Harry asked with raised eyebrows.

"I shall make you a wand, Mister Potter. You may collect it later this afternoon. Thank you for making my morning so very interesting. Seven Galleons, and I'll see you this afternoon.

Harry dug through his money bag and laid out the coins. "Thank you for your help, sir. I really appreciate it."

"My pleasure, young man. Good day, Rubeus."

Harry and Hagrid set off to complete their shopping and then return later for the wand. Hagrid deposited Harry at Madam Malkin's Robes for All Occasions, saying he had another errand to run, and would return for Harry in an hour.

Madam Malkin greeted him, ascertained he was for Hogwarts, and directed him to the back for a fitting. As he turned the corner, Harry saw another boy roughly his age standing on a footstool as an assistant pinned up and marked his robes. Two magical tape measures flitted around nearby. The boy was blonde, pale, and thin with a rather pointed face. To Harry's eyes, his energy was a jumble of nervous silver coils that spiraled around one another like a warped slinky. It felt out of tune to Harry.

The boy spoke in a cultured voice, "Hello. You for Hogwarts, too?"

"Yes," Harry answered.

They engaged in casual conversation as Harry tried desperately to understand what the boy was talking about. Quidditch? Racing brooms? Hufflepuff? Soon the boy was spouting off about the wrong sorts of people, implying he was above the rules, and bragging about his father's wealth. He reminded Harry very much of Dudley.

Out of pure boredom and curiosity, and perhaps a little animosity, Harry decided to toss a monkey wrench into the spiraling coils of the arrogant boy's magic. He picked one of the center coils and watched it for a moment to gauge its motion. Then Harry reached out and pulled a fair bit of energy off the middle ring, and it began to slow and wobble profoundly around the boy's torso. The rings above and below it started to falter as well. In a few seconds all the bands had gone fuzzy and were moving as if in slow motion. The boy was experiencing a spontaneous coughing fit and was turning a bit green now as well. Curiosity satisfied, Harry released his damping Pull on the coil-clouds, and watched them begin to accelerate once more. Within three revolutions the nervous rings were back to normal. The boy's coughing eased off as he blinked repeatedly, shivered, and spastically clenched one hand.

"Are you okay?" Harry asked, mostly to keep up appearances.

"Fine, fine," the boy choked out, blushing. "Must have swallowed wrong or something." Madam Malkin offered him a glass of water which he quickly downed.

Harry could feel the bit of siphoned-off magic bouncing around inside him with the same nervous twirling it had when surrounding the boy. It made his hair want to stand on end. Not having anything

else in mind for it, Harry squashed it into his own blue magic, which just sort of...swallowed it. Now that was curious, Harry thought. The blonde boy was disinclined to further conversation, and left soon after, saying only "See you at Hogwarts, then."

Ms. Malkin ushered him forward. "Alright, young man, you're next. Up on the stool, please."

Harry climbed the stool, stood very still for the enchanted tape measures, and thought about what he'd just done. That was slightly cruel, he supposed, but that boy was a git. Harry knew bullies when we saw them, and that boy was a bully-in-training. What surprised him, really, was how simple it had been. Unbalancing that boy's magic had been literally child's play. Harry hadn't actually cast a spell. Heck, he didn't even know any spells yet. But he had grabbed ahold of someone else's magic, and made it do what he wanted. And somewhere in his eleven-year-old mind, that was pretty cool.

School uniform shopping complete, Harry and Hagrid visited the apothecary, the stationers, the trunk shop, and Flourish and Bott's books. Harry had never spent so much money or seen so many insanely great things in one day, ever, and he told Hagrid as much every ten minutes. Hagrid just grinned.

Eventually they stopped for lunch, followed by ice-cream and more conversation

"Jus' your wand left, Harry, and... I wanted to get you somethin' fer yer birthday, too, if you don' mind."

"Hagrid, you don't have to do that -"

"I know tha' Harry, I jus' thought you wouldn' mind havin' a pet, is all. How do yeh feel abou' cats?"

Harry wrinkled his nose a bit and shook his head; he didn't mind cats on occasion, but he was not a cat person, particularly.

"Jus' as well, they make me sneeze anyways. I s'pose an owl woul' be the ticket, then, yeah? To Carry your mail an' all tha'." Harry's eyebrows shot up and Hagrid grinned.

Forty minutes later they left Eyelops' Owl Emporium with a beautiful snowy owl. She had the most beautiful silver-blue energy Harry had ever seen; purple motes drifted through it all around her. She slept contentedly in her cage with her head tucked under her wing as they made their way back towards Ollivander's. He thanked Hagrid profusely for the gift, nearly making the huge man blush. Harry had never gotten a gift that special before, and told Hagrid this was truly the best day of his life.

As they re-entered the wand shop, Mr Ollivander was just packing away two of the biggest tusks Harry had ever seen. Where did one get mammoth tusks, anyway? Harry caught a whiff of spruce, presumably from the woodworking, and anticipation bloomed within him. Motes of sawdust mingled with the motes of magic Harry saw in the air, making the whole shop look as if it were a vast field of miniature stars.

"Ah, Mister Potter, excellent timing. The varnish on your wand should be sufficiently dry by now. Let's see, then, shall we?"

The wandmaker glided into his back room and returned momentarily, holding a red velvet polishing rag, and cradled within it, a wand. It was a pale honey color with dark honey streaks reaching down the tapered length of it. There was no visible seam. A somewhat thicker handle section curved gracefully to a small endcap of dark wood, presumably securing the core.

The wand fairly hummed in Harry's vision as it came closer. A crisp blue field overlaid its shape, packed with small golden flecks that sped up as it got closer. Ollivander set it down on the counter.

"Thirteen and one-half inches, living Blue Spruce and phoenix feather. A surprisingly Resonant combination," Ollivander stated with enthusiasm.

"Give it a wave, Mister Potter."

Harry approached the counter cautiously, like a child meeting a very big dog for the first time. As his hand neared the wand, the blue nimbus around the wand became much brighter, and evidently became visible to the others in the room. "Very curious..." was all Ollivander had time to say before Harry grasped his own wand for the first time. It sang to him, literally, in his mind. He could hear its two overlapping notes rising and falling depending on how he turned

and twisted the wand: one crisp, trumpet-like, the other resonant and warm like a cello.

'Here goes nothing,' Harry thought, and he pushed a bit of his own blue magic into the wand. He had no frame of reference for what happened next. The wand practically jumped in his hand, the calm notes in his head becoming more like electric guitars as a turquoise-gold deluge of light and sound erupted from the wand. Everyone had to turn their eyes away briefly as the golden light grew impossibly bright and the trumpet-clarion tone transformed into something...else. Harry guessed it was a note of true Phoenix song, rich with layered harmonics and a feeling of sunrise, chocolate cake and comfort. It gave him chills.

"Blinking rapidly to clear his vision, Harry looked around to see Hagrid staring back slack-jawed. Mr Ollivander's eyebrows had both climbed to his hairline, and every single mote of magic in the room had turned a brilliant sky blue. But, Harry supposed, they couldn't see that, so he'd have to keep that to himself.

Harry's face split with the biggest grin it could hold, as he declared "Uh, that works for me."

"Blimey, Harry..." was all Hagrid managed to say.

"Ahem. That was rather extraordinary, even for one of my wands. We shall definitely be expecting great things from you, Mister Potter."

"Yes, sir. Thank you, sir, for your efforts."

"You're quite welcome, Mister Potter. Enjoy your year at Hogwarts."

The sun was low in the sky as they made their way back through the Cauldron into London. They rode the Underground to Paddington Station, from which Harry could take connecting train to Surrey. They got a fair number of odd glances from their fellow passengers, what with all the packages, a rather striking white owl, and, well...Hagrid.

They sat to wait for Harry's train. Harry was quiet for a sizable interval, and Hagrid had noticed.

"Alright there, Harry?"

"Er...yeah, thanks. It's just...everyone back there", he titled his head, "thinks they know me, Hagrid. They all recognize me, and know all kinds of stuff about me that I didn't even know about myself - things I supposedly did. I'm pretty sure I'm not who they think I am. I'm just Harry, really."

"Hrmm," Hagrid vocalized a frown, then a pause. "I see what ya mean. But yer famous, Harry. Not much you can do abou' tha'; might as well enjoy it a little. And let 'em get to know the real you, not the kid in the stories."

"I guess..." Harry whinged, not very convinced.

"Yer true friends won't let you down, Harry. Just give them a chance."

"Ok, Hagrid, but you're still be around, right?"

"Course I am, Harry. You can visit as much as you like. Come down fer tea and all tha'."

That notion mollified Harry somewhat, that he'd always have at least one friend at school. "I'd really like that, Hagrid."

"Oh, you'll be needin' this. Nearly forgo' in all the excitemen'." Hagrid handed him a slightly rumpled but very elaborate ticket. "Tha's your ticket for the train t' Hogwarts. Kings Cross, First o'September."

"Got it."

"An' Harry, if the Dursleys give you one whiff o' trouble, you send that owl off with a letter. I'll be there in a hour. You can tell old Vernon tha' too." Harry grinned and shook his head.

"Safe travels, Harry. See yeh in a few weeks." Hagrid gave him a rather enormous hug, which Harry did his best to return. Hagrid gave him one last look, then turned and moved off through the crowd like a human snowplow. Harry stared after him, watching his first real friend disappear from view. The train ride home was uneventful, apart from the occasional stares. Everyone looked so

plain to Harry, now, by comparison. Although his owl was still amazing.

Apparently Hagrid had made a /memorable/ impression on the Dursleys, as they quizzed him upon his arrival about whether they might be seeing Hagrid again any time soon. Harry assured them that Hagrid was "only a call away," which was essentially true. They eyed his new possessions balefully, although Petunia's expression warmed a bit when she saw the stunning white owl.

After a short, whispered discussion in the kitchen, Vernon informed Harry that he would now be staying in Dudley's second bedroom. Harry suspected they were trying to deflect any potential retribution should Hagrid come calling, but he wasn't one to complain about improved accommodations. He couldn't even stretch out all the way in the cupboard any more. So that's how Harry Potter got his very own room.

Dudley's (mostly broken) toys were trooped to the basement, despite his monumental whining. Soon Harry found himself with an actual bed, a desk, and a door he could shut. Harry amused himself with the thought that all it took was a handful of life changing events and threats from a giant. A knock at his door prompted Harry to glance up and find his Aunt standing just inside the door, her arms folded around a stack of bed linens. She pursed her lips, stepped forward and pulled the door nearly shut behind her. She handed Harry the sheets, which were accepted with a quiet thanks.

A furrowed brow joined the pursed lips. She crossed her arms and said quietly, "This is to be your room now, Harry. There are some rules. I know what my sister was, what she could do. You're so much like her. But there will be no magic done in this house, Harry. Vernon won't stand for it, and I won't fight him over it. That world has taken so much from me... from us, I suppose," she amended, lifting her eyes to Harry's. "I don't want it in this house. No wands, no magic. Understood?"

"Yes, Aunt Petunia."

"Your owl can stay; just keep it quiet. Don't give those two," -she inclined her head towards the hall, "...any excuses to make things more difficult than they already are."

"Alright." Harry found it best to confine himself to short answers when his Aunt was nervous.

"It's a lovely bird; have you named it yet?"

"No, I haven't picked a name for her. She is definitely special though...I can feel it."

Petunia's eyes smiled a little. "I believe you, Harry."

That simple statement caught Harry rather off guard. He felt his eyes dampen in response to the implications in that statement and had to turn his head away. Petunia noticed this and squeezed her own eyes closed in a suppressed flinch; this whole thing was so stilted between them. When Harry looked back, his face was carefully neutral again. He sniffed, and met her eyes.

Even more quietly, she said "I'll work on Vernon, Harry, but please keep your head down until you leave for school."

Harry nodded in understanding. He was very good at keeping out of Vernon's way. She stepped carefully over to his desk, brushed her hand against the worn surface. She appeared lost in thought for a half a minute. Then, over her shoulder Petunia said "I've seen that Sisik around, you know. I heard it singing from the back hedge last week."

That afternoon flashed through Harry's mind. He answered slowly, "Did you? I'm glad," a ghost of a smile touching his voice.

His aunt paused on her way to the door, and said in her quietest voice, "Me too, Harry."

Harry watched the door close behind her, not knowing quite what to think about that conversation with his Aunt. His eyes drifted over the room to his desk - he had a desk! - and noticed something that hadn't been there a moment ago, something flat and small. He rose and shuffled to the desk, only to find a small, faded picture there, black and white, creased with age and much wear.

It showed what must be his mother and his Aunt, each with one arm around the other, laughing at the camera. It was an informal picture, with the girls standing before a large tree on a sunny day. They were



happy, in the photo. A bit stunned, Harry slowly sunk into his chair as he drank in the image. This was his mother, not much older than he was now. She was pretty, in a sundress and hat. Petunia looked genuinely happy in the picture; an expression Harry could never remember seeing on her in his entire life. And he realized that maybe she had lost something precious, too, all those years ago. It didn't excuse their treatment of him, not in the slightest; but it did explain a things a little. Petunia had lost the brightest thing in her life, too. Harry could sort of understand that.

## CH07: A Bully, a Bird, and a Box of Props

Harry's belongings had spread out over his new bedroom at Number Four Privet Drive. It was the first time he'd ever had enough space of his own to spread out, really, and he was taking full advantage. Books covered every horizontal surface; spell books, creature books, magical dictionaries, and thee potions texts were all laid out with Hagrid's rock cakes holding down the pages. Harry had tried one, wondered at its mineral content, stood on it, successfully pounded a nail with it, and now had it leveling the wobbly leg on his bed. But they did make excellent paper weights.

Harry had decided in a moment of insight that Potions might be something he could excel in, because it didn't require strong magic, and because he was adept at cooking. Runes might work too, and there was a new first year survey course on them. So, Harry killed time by reading the Potions text twice, looking up the words he didn't know, and making notes in the margins of the pages. Writing with a quill and inkpot proved too problematic after the second spill, so he spent a little of his pocket money on a second-hand Scheaffer fountain pen with a fine silver nib, confident that his written assignments would sufficiently resemble everyone else's, but without the mess.

His reading was interrupted by a soft hoot from the owl perched on the elaborate stand near the open window. As it was nearly dusk, she was ready to start her nightly flight of the neighborhood in search of mice. Harry could tell she didn't really care for Surrey; neither did he, really. He'd named her Hedwig, from the German for 'battle maiden', a female warrior -partly because he liked the name when he saw it in 'A History of Quidditch', and partly because it suited her predatory nature. He had become rather attuned to her

moods and energy, and she to his. He saw this in practice a few days ago.

Harry was absorbed in a Charms text when his heretofore docile and sublimely content owl turned her head from the window to stare very hard at door. Harry got a shiver from the shift he felt her energy resonance; it normally hovered in the back of his mind like a safe place, but it suddenly got very...protective.

Harry lifted his eyes to her, and saw her ruffle her feathers and shifted her weight. Three very sharp, very large talons peeled away three perfect curls of varnished oak from the perch under her right foot. She was glaring toward his door, which Harry had carelessly left ajar, and now sat open. Dudley had strolled into Harry's room uninvited; apparently he'd seen a bag of wizarding candy on the desk. Hedwig hissed sharply at the Whale. In Harry's mind, the corner of the room around her perch had gone scarlet.

"Is that candy, shrimp? Let's see what you got!" Dudley said arrogantly, ignoring the owl. Evidently he still considered it to be his room, even though all his discarded possessions had been exiled to the basement some days prior. Harry sent a little push of magic at Hedwig so she'd look at him. When she did, he made a tiny shake of the head. Her brow furrowed at him but she relaxed very, very slightly.

Turning to to address his cousin, who was watching their byplay, Harry said in a carefully deadpan voice "Go away, Dudley."

"What's the matter, Potter, you too good to share?" Dudley provoked, striding towards the bag. His recent pursuit of boxing lessons had rendered him slightly less enormous and significantly more arrogant. Harry was certain the last thing Dudley needed was lessons on how to hit harder. Harry got to his feet; bad to be stuck in a chair if trouble broke out. And it often did, around Dudley.

"No, I share with my friends. That's not yours. Put that down, and get out of my room." Harry kept his voice even despite the adrenaline spike clanging through his brain. Every past attempt to stand up Dudley had ended in violence of one sort or another, with Harry typically outnumbered to boot. 'Although', thought Harry, 'even when it's just Dudley, he outnumbers me three to one. He weighs nearly triple what I do!'

Dudley paused in the act of pocketing a handful of chocolate bars and sugar quills to turn a piggy-eyed stare on Harry.

"What did you say?" he asked in a quietly menacing tone that Harry was all too familiar with. Dudley dropped the sweets on the desk negligently, and turned to face Harry. Harry could see the normally greasy grey energy cloud around his cousin begin to perturbate with black ripples, a telltale sign of impending violence from the Whale. Hedwig had apparently sensed it too, because she rose up and shook out her wings, the sound of which drew a glance from Harry. She hissed and leveled a malice-filled glare at Dudley's back, but did not leave her perch.

A blur of motion drew Harry's eye, only to see a very chunky palm barely a foot away and closing rapidly. Dudley grabbed him by the tee-shirt and pulled Harry to his toes with no effort, drawing his right hand back as he did. Squinty eyes under a heavy unibrow glared at Harry. After eleven years of bullying, Harry knew far too well what was going to happen next. His own pupils dilated, his breath caught in his chest, adrenaline surging. Fight or flight instincts clamored in his brain: This was bad. Whenever he got grabbed, things got very bad, very quickly. The short, hard punches were nearly impossible to dodge. Then came the kicking. Harry hated the kicking most of all.

"WHAT did you say, Freak?" Dudley growled as knuckles cracked on a fist almost as big as Harry's whole head.

In hindsight, Harry supposed it was his hatred of that word on top of the adrenaline and fear that caused him to react so strongly. A decision crystallized in some unconscious part of Harry's mind. He grasped the thick wrist of the hand fouling his shirt. He knew from experience he couldn't break Dudley's grip, but he had no intention of doing so now. Focusing, Harry Pulled a mess of energy out of Dudley in about a third of a second, mostly in the form of heat. Moving heat was easy for him thanks to all the practice keeping himself warm in a drafty cupboard. The energy moved through Harry like a luminous ripple, front to back. An uncontrollable spasm convulsed through Dudley as his body temperature dropped nearly twenty degrees instantaneously. A surge of heat bloomed out behind Harry, vented through his back as he Pulled the energy in and willed it out behind him.

Dudley gasped as though a hundred gallons of ice water had just gone down his back. He shivered so badly his hands lost all coordination, including their grip on Harry. Dudley dropped to his knees in front of Harry, who still held the cantaloupe-sized wrist in both hands. Dudley's head bobbed wildly as shivers passed through his chins, neck and shoulders in great waves. Harry could hear the boy's teeth clacking together loudly as Dudley stared at him, wide eyed and fearful. Total time, three point eight seconds. Harry loosened his grip on the twitching arm and it collapsed to flop weakly at Dudley's side as he drew breath in great uneven gasps. His breath was visible, fogging as it met the overheated air in the room. Frost clung to his eyelashes, and steam rose from his hair. When Dudley tried to speak, it came out as "WehHaah-hihuh?" because he was still shivering too much to properly use his lower jaw.

Harry stepped back out of reach and pushed a hand roughly through his hair. He frowned severely at Dudley. 'Calm down and think,' he ordered himself. He hadn't meant to send quite that big a message, but he being grabbed had thoroughly freaked him out. God, his cousin was a jerk; a big, fat, greasy, steaming jerk.

Given that the room was quite a bit warmer than he, Dudley quickly began to thaw. Hedwig had resumed her elegant upright posture, and Harry swore she looked positively smug; smart bird, that one. Hedwig clicked her beak once in Harry's direction. Mind racing, Harry decided what's done was done, and he wasn't going to apologize for it. It was time Dudley understood a few things. After allowing the jerk to thaw a bit more, Harry stepped forward and got right in Dudley's face. Channeling one of his comic book favorites, Harry said "Human body's got a lot of heat, Duddykins. All that water at 98 degrees, you know." Harry paused for effect as his eyes bored into Dudley's. "Keep your hands off me and my stuff, and no more frostbite. Got it?"

Dudley nodded very fast.

"What did you-"

"You wouldn't understand it if I told you. You just remember that feeling. It can get worse, trust me. It would be a shame to get flash-frozen in August."

Dudley blanched further. Harry was bluffing, but he didn't know that.

"Tell your buddies I'm done getting picked on. I'm serious. I AM a freak, and I'm bad for their health." Harry let a little of his actual magic into his eyes, which made them go electric blue-green. It was completely useless but looked pretty cool, and he was definitely playing up the 'dangerous guy' angle.

"S-Sure...ok," Dudley stammered, nodding profusely. Harry took three long steps out of reach.

"I think you should leave now."

Harry watched as the large boy staggered to his feet and backed away crabwise towards the door, never taking his eyes off Harry. The door clicked shut. Harry counted to three, then released the breath he'd been holding. That had been harder than he thought it would be, acting tough and laying down the law. But Dudley needed to learn a lesson, and Harry wanted to set a memorable precedent. Harry refused to be pushed around by him or anyone else any more. He refused to continue being a victim; not when he had the power to change things. Fortunately, Harry had learned the difference between standing up to a bully and being one. Ironically those lessons had come not from the relatives entrusted with his upbringing, but from the books and comics he read at the library. Thanks to Spiderman, Harry understood that power came with responsibility. Still, he was just an eleven year old kid, and mistakes were bound to happen. Some things you have to learn for yourself.

Harry spent the entirety of the next day at the public library, from just after breakfast (which Vernon forbid him to eat, although Harry managed to sneak a bit on the side while cooking) right through 'till closing. He splurged on a lunch of Crisps and Coke from a vending machine. Partly, he wanted to get away from those awful people, but mostly he was keen to try and figure out what the heck was going on inside him when he moved energy around. With Hogwarts looming, Harry wanted to know everything he could about energy, as distinct from magic. Magic seemed to behave according to its own rules, rather than simply behaving like energy. It wasn't sentient, but it was...aware, and purposeful, as if it understood what it needed to be doing.

Harry believed he had very little magic of his own, based on what he saw of other magic users in Diagon Alley. Harry supposed that he

might need to rely on his energy abilities to complete his schoolwork or even to defend himself, rather than relying completely on magic like most wizards did. Hopefully he'd make out okay if he studied hard, read ahead, and found a teacher who'd help him. That sounded like his best hope, anyway. Nobody else was looking out for him, except Hedwig, and maybe Hagrid.

That afternoon he sat in a quiet corner reading a magazine article about the various types of animals that use electrical energy for sensing and defense; apparently one type of shark could sense electrical energies at distance like he could. Harry plowed through a stack of books and magazines that afternoon, and was reading about x-ray machines when he stumbled on another word he didn't understand. Seeing it repeated several times throughout the coming paragraph, he thumbed open his adopted copy of Chamber's Technical Dictionary and began hunting.

"Camber...cantilever...here it is. Capacitor: Capacitors are mainly used as energy storage devices; that is, they store electrical energy until the energy is required to enter the circuit and do useful work. A capacitor functions like a battery, but charges and discharges much more quickly and efficiently. A capacitor is much simpler than a battery, as it can't produce new electrons - it only stores them.. Capacitors can be manufactured to serve any purpose, from the smallest plastic capacitor in a calculator, to an ultra capacitor that can power a commuter bus."

Harry's head rocked back at that, eyes a bit wide. He copied down the definition word for word into his second-hand notebook. You could store energy in something that wasn't a battery? Powerful enough to run a whole bus? Apparently capacitors could charge or discharge in fractions of a second. Boy, did THAT sound familiar. Harry grinned.

Harry spent the next four hours reading about capacitors, conductivity, and the theory and practice of moving and storing electricity. It was the most well understood form of energy in the normal world, Harry reasoned, so it should have the most books written about it. Some ideas were obvious to Harry, for instance the flow of energy generating heat; but he found other ideas he had never seen before, like the idea that matter was just clouds of energy bound up in things called atoms. Upon seeing diagrams of electron clouds around atoms, Harry was struck by the thought that

everything, literally everything, really did have clouds around it. Maybe he wasn't completely crazy after all.

Eventually the library staff began their evening rounds of collecting books and pushing in chairs. Harry stumbled out into the night air, bleary eyed from so much reading, and sore from too much sitting on hard wooden chairs. His brain was buzzing with ideas about energy and magic.

The next ten days passed in much the same fashion, with Harry doing his assigned chores and otherwise remaining out of sight. Dudley completely ignored him, which suited Harry just fine. Harry had read through all of his first-year textbooks by now, as well as most of the other wizarding books he had bought. Their version of his history would take a lot of getting used to. Two more days spent at the Surrey public library had provided some answers, some ideas, and a whole lot more questions. Never in his life had he been this motivated to read. Harry needed to know what was possible without magic, and what became possible with magic. He could barely wait to be able to use his wand.

Harry had started idly collecting little bits and pieces of potentially useful items. 'Props', he called them, since he planned on doing magic with them. First he salvaged a string from Dudley's abandoned electric bass. It was nearly the thickness of a pencil and almost four feet long with a solid metal core. It was sturdy and conducted energy really well. Next was a coil of very thin copper wire, must have been ten meters of it on a little spool in the basement under a heavy coating of dust. He had no idea of its original use, but it conducted energy well and Harry was pretty sure he'd find a use for it.

He had three little white LED light bulbs salvaged from a broken strand of christmas lights. Those he could light between his fingers. He could do this purely with magic, which was required significant effort and concentration; or he could move energy into them and they'd glow with virtually effort on his part - provided he had something to move energy FROM. He'd given himself chills and covered his bed in frost the first time he tried to light all three at once by pulling energy out of the ambient air. After some practice, he could use one like a flashlight and confine the temperature drop to just the area around one arm. Dead useful, that.

He'd added a pack of waterproof matches to his kit, lifted from the disused box of camping supplies in the Dursley basement along with a small candle in a tin. He could ignite a match pretty easily; much easier than lighting a candle. Wax candles tended to melt before they got hot enough to ignite, whereas the matches would just smolder a bit, then flare to life. A folded square of aluminium foil made for a handy heat reflector.

Magnets were Harry's favorite prop. With a minor effort he could get a magnet to hover in his hand, just by energizing his palm to the polarity opposite that of the magnet. He took to this like a game, floating two, then four, and eventually a dozen or more tiny circular magnets around him. By shifting the energy in a ring around him, he could set his little collection rotating like his own personal rings of Saturn. Harry wasn't completely sure how useful the magnets were, yet, but they were fun to play with. All the Props except the guitar string went into a plastic zip-lock bag he pilfered from the kitchen. He had heat [fire], light [bulbs], and reach [wire] as well as the odds and ends.

He'd traded a few short letters with Hagrid, and Hedwig seemed perfectly happy flying to Scotland and back with his post. Harry missed her terribly when she was gone. After the Dudley Incident, as he'd taken to calling it, he'd taken to talking to her about anything and everything. Apparently she understood a great deal of what he said, or perhaps read the emotion behind it, because she often responded to Harry's words and moods with an assortment of with clicks, whistles and hisses. Her energetic nimbus would shift in response to his, often resonating in time like synchronized heartbeats. Harry found himself very attached to her already; she accepted him for what and who he was, and to Harry that was worth its weight in gold. Hedwig had taken to sitting on the headboard of his bed while he slept, literally watching over him. Over time Harry noticed new blue flecks in her energy aura - the same shade of blue as his own magic. Harry presumed it was something one of his books mentioned in passing as a "familiar bond." He'd have to research that more at Hogwarts.

Finally it was the 31st. Tomorrow was the day his whole life would change, again. He took up his teacup, gone cold some time ago, and shoved a little heat into it from the air surrounding him. In a few seconds, steam rose from the cup into the now noticeably cooler air



around the boy. Where thermodynamics was concerned, there was no free lunch, but there could be hot tea.

## CH08: Express

By noon on August 31st, Harry Potter was packed and ready to start his next foray into wizarddom. It had taken a lot of convincing of Vernon to secure a ride to Kings Cross, and Harry finally had to invoke the Hagrid Sanction to get his uncle to see the wisdom of getting rid of him for the next nine months. Mentioning his friend's name caused Vernon to pale considerably and stammer and agreement.

September first dawned clear and crisp. Harry awakened to a soft hoot and the sight of Hedwig peering down at him from the headboard.

"Hello, Girl. Everything alright?"

They proceeded to 'converse' for the next ten minutes while Harry dressed, made his bed, and stored the few things he wouldn't be taking with him. Harry picked up his wand and stared closely at it, as he often did. Just because he could cast spells outside of school, didn't mean he couldn't HOLD the wand. It sang quietly in the back of his mind, two overlaid notes of echoing beauty, trumpet and cello, that changed in pitch and volume as he twirled it slowly in his hand. He'd learned to gauge the amount of power he sent into it by trial and error, to control the light and sound he perceived flowing off of it. Interestingly, he could Pull energy through it and it never got warm; the phoenix feather, he supposed. He had repurposed a little leather holster from one of Dudley's long-since-discarded water pistols and opened a small hole in the bottom, so it would carry the wand, point down, from his belt. The length of the wand handle made a right side draw awkward, so he flipped it around to a cross-handed draw from his left hip. Being eleven, he spent hours one day in front of the bathroom mirror practicing his quickdraw, gun slinger style. The wand literally never left his side, now. He could hear it in the back of his head right now, humming contentedly. He'd experimented with distances and found he could sense its location and distance out to about four meters away; more if he sent out a pulse of his own magic, since it would resonate with the pulse. That was always a bit tiring, though, depending on the amount of power he put into the pulse. He wondered if there were any way to make the wand as

facile with energy as it was with magic. He'd have to ask somebody about that, Harry decided.

His uncle's voice drifted up the stairs. "Boy! I am leaving in FIVE minutes exactly. Get your things in the car and be quick about it!"

Harry grinned with palpable excitement. He carried Hedwig to the window and instructed her to fly to Hogwarts and meet him there later tonight. Why cage her and stick her on a train when she can fly at her own leisure? Harry heaved his trunk into the boot of his uncle's BMW and they snaked through traffic for nearly an hour before the huge arched windows of Kings Cross came into view. Harry was never happier to get out a car. He'd retrieved his trunk from the boot and thanked his uncle for the ride. As he was just about to walk away, Vernon handed him a folded Fifty Pound note with a sour look on his face.

"From your Aunt," was all he said, as if he thoroughly disagreed with it. Harry supposed he probably did. Harry took the bill and nodded at his uncle. Vernon just rolled up the window and drove smartly away without a backward glance.

It was the biggest bill Harry had ever seen, much less handled - fifty pounds was half a week's shopping at Privet Drive. Harry was making to stuff the bill into his pocket when some writing on it caught his eye. He unfolded it properly, and to his surprise he saw there in his Aunt's slanted writing the words "Good Luck, Harry. Be Safe. -P". At least someone had a thought for his well being. Feeling anxious, Harry made his way inside and stopped to admire the metalwork arches of the high ceiling, find a luggage cart, and catch his breath. Surely there was a way to lighten this trunk! He'd memorized the ticket already, of course, but he pulled it out again and re-read it describing platform nine and three-quarters.

He trudged up to Platform Nine, which looked perfectly mundane, nearly deserted, and in need of fresh paint. Pressing on, he came round a magazine kiosk and...there was a glowing orange rectangle in the wall, right where the ticket said it would be. Huh. Harry rolled his eyes, then glanced left and right to the people scurrying by. They totally ignored the shining door, so he assumed there was some type of magic preventing ordinary people from seeing it. To Harry, though, it was a big neon sign announcing 'magical entrance here!'. Not very subtle, really. Harry toned down his energetic sight once

again in anticipation of lots of magical glare, and pressed on. He leaned on the cart and marched right through. Once he passed the plane of the wall, the interstitial space looked rather oddly folded, zig-zag style, over and over. Curious.

Four long steps brought him through the boundary on the other side, and Harry felt his jaw loosen in wonder at the most amazing train he'd ever seen. It was handsome in bright red paint, billowing steam and possibility up over the platform. Harry could see luminous heat plumes of various radiances glowing from within the big red engine, and a crowd of auras in the first few cars. A faint golden nimbus cocooned the entire train - what his book called wards, Harry supposed. Different magic ran along each car's flanks in little gold sparks, tracing the filigree in the carved woodwork. Harry boggled a bit at all of this magic, this huge place hidden right here in central London.

He glanced around at the moderately large crowd on the platform. Nearly all were magical, a riot of energies swirling above their restrained black and grey robes. Parents and children were saying their goodbyes. Other children were hauling trunks and pets onto the train, chatting loudly. He supposed the blonde boy would be here somewhere; kids his age were everywhere. A few ordinary people - Muggles, Harry had read they were called - circulated amongst the crowd. They blended in physically but looked completely different energetically, like pale ghosts next to the magic users. Harry wondered idly if anyone else could tell.

Harry stepped around a family of four, each of whom had auras the shape of polar bears hovering around them. He didn't react, but filed that observation away for later study. How did one get the energetic aura of an animal form, anyway.

He approached a kiosk, bought himself a newspaper calling itself The Quibbler, and boarded the train. He watched little gold sparks jump to the sole of his shoe as he placed his foot on the step, accompanied by a brief tingle in the sole of his right foot. Apparently it was 'recognizing' him. He pushed a tiny flow of his own blue magic back towards it, a few motes leaking out of his shoe like snow. The miniature gold tendrils wrapped around a few of the motes, flashed once and spiraled away, leaving the motes to hover around Harry's foot. That was just really cool to watch. He pulled the blue stars back to himself, pleased not to have lost them.

Surprisingly, most of the train's interior was ordinary, with very little magic except for the lights overhead, and apparently the restrooms. That suited Harry fine as his vision could be relaxed a little. The fit and finish of the interior was excellent, but felt very old to Harry, who didn't know the train was indeed last-century Victorian style. He passed a number of closed compartments with auras in them accompanied by the sounds of conversations. He passed a handful of students in the aisle, most in uniform already. A little girl with a duck-shaped halo went by, then a boy whose cloud looked like twizzlers. Magic was weird.

Thankfully he was early enough to get a compartment to himself. He shut the door, stood his trunk in empty front corner of the car, and settled into the seat nearest the window. His little bag of tricks came out of his pocket to sit beside him, and pulled out three of his little magnets to juggle. With them twirling idly over his hand, he watched the energy clouds of the people walking by on the platform. Silver tinged with reds, pinks blues and purples were the most common colors. One slightly haggard looking man shambled past with a double, concentric cloud around him. A small red-purple core was surrounded and smothered by the greasy grey silhouette of a...wolf-thing. It made Harry wince to look at it - a curse, Harry supposed. Magic was weird.

The train pulled out on time. No sooner had they left the station than a knock sounded at the door. It slid open, and a bushy-haired young girl leaned in. Tentatively she asked, "Do you mind company? Everywhere else is full."

"Sure, come on in."

She rewarded him with a smile, heaved the door fully open, and lugged a trunk behind her. Harry stood to help her move in place next to his, then stepped back. "Thanks," she said, pushing a loose curl behind one ear. "I'm Hermione, Hermione Granger," she said, extending a hand.

Harry shook it. Her hands were small, and warm. She was a bit plain looking with a mass of brown curls and prominent front teeth. But that's not all Harry saw when he looked at her. Her energy surrounded her like a fuzzy bathrobe, and was a silver so pure it shone like chrome. What caught his eye, though, was a circlet of

bright white light perched atop her head. It was a simple round band of energy that glowed brightly as faint colors rippled across its surface. To Harry, it was beautiful. He realized he'd been staring and was expected to respond.

"Oh, sorry... Harry, Harry Potter. Nice to meet you.

Her eyes widened. "Are you really?

Harry gestured to the benches, and they moved to sit across from one another.

With a chuckle, Harry asked, "Am I really Harry Potter, or am I really glad to meet you?" he said with half a grin.

"Both, I guess..." she said shyly.

"Yes, I'm him. And yes, I'm pleased to meet you. I don't know anyone else here.

"Me neither." She tilted her head at him in a gesture he would come to know very well. The bright ring around her pulsed. "But wait, you're famous! You're in all the history books. Everybody knows you!" She challenged.

"Actually, no. I grew up with my aunt and uncle in Surrey. I only found out about magic when I turned eleven, and my letter showed up."

"Really? Me, too!" She gave him a nervous smile. Harry noticed her attire for the first time; ordinary pants, coat, sweater, store-bought shoes.

"So your parents aren't magical, then?"

She shook her head. "They're dentists. We live in Wallington." Her eyes clicked to his, looking for recognition or approval. Harry nodded.

"Who came to see you?" she asked. "About your letter?"

Harry grinned, remembering that night. "Hagrid. He works at Hogwarts. You?"

"Professor McGonagall. She teaches Transfiguration."

"Ah."

The head tilt again. "So you really didn't know anything about the magical world until a month ago?"

"Yep. My relatives never mentioned it."

"Huh."

"They don't like magic."

Her eyebrows when up, asking for elaboration.

"I've been cramming every day since then. I bought all my textbooks early and read them through. Plus other stuff."

At the mention of books, the bright band around Hermione's brow flashed incandescent while she grinned at him. "Oh, me too! I didn't want to be too far behind. There's so much to learn!"

Harry gave her a lopsided grin, and replied "Yeah...but in those books, the stories about me are all exaggerated. I mean, I was two. What could I have done to defeat a dark wizard?"

Confusion marred her brow, making the glowing circlet frown, which sort of amused to Harry. "But, the books say..."

"I know what they say, I've read several. But if I'm supposed to be the only one who survived, and I don't remember anything, how can they know?"

"No one else was there?"

"I don't think so."

"Huh," she hummed, drawing the sound out a bit. The circlet of energy about her head resumed its usual shape. "I guess they're fiction, then."

"Pretty much."

There was a pause in the conversation, so Harry unthinkingly picked up one of the magnets from the bench beside him and caused it to float over his hand. He'd done this so often it was a habit. "So did you go to school in Wallington?" he asked, for want of a better topic.

"Yes...What's that?" His eyes clicked to hers, and she was staring intently at the magnet hovering over his palm.

"Just a magnet. Here," he said, letting it drop into his palm, then handing it across to her.

Hermione accepted the little black disk and spun it in her fingers. Her circlet-halo pulsed as she stared at it. She tapped it to one of the metal buttons on her coat, watched it cling there before removing it. "Huh..."

Harry watched her think, her large brown eyes snapping back and forth between him and the magnet. There was something keen and bright in her gaze. She was a thinker, like him, and probably liked puzzles.

She handed the magnet back as she asked "How were you doing that, exactly? And without a wand?"

"I'll give you a hint," Harry said with a smile in his voice. "It wasn't magic."

He got her with that one; both of her eyebrows rose, and something orange rippled through the glowing circlet above her brow. Her eyes narrowed a bit as her tone grew a bit stern. "Of course it was, Harry... but doing magic without a wand is supposed to be very difficult..." She worried her lip as she thought about it some more.

"Nope, not magic," Harry said, shaking his head and smiling at her. Bantering with this girl was fun. He levitated the magnet above his left palm again and let it twirl there

She furrowed her brow at him, which Harry was beginning to enjoy causing, and looked at him for a long beat.

"THIS is my magic," Harry said, holding up the other palm and willing some of his blue magic motes into the palm of his hand. He created a small blue nimbus around his right hand. "Can you see it?"

Hermione's jaw had dropped and inch, and her eyes were wide, now. "Um, yeah... yes, I see it...but how are you-"

Harry dropped the nimbus effect.

"Oh. How did you do THAT, then?" she asked, now mightily confused.

"I just moved my magic into my hand. Doesn't yours do that?"

She blushed. "I don't... I don't really know, Harry. I haven't cast a spell yet."

Harry waived her objection away as he said "Right, right... no spells outside of school. But how does your hand feel when you just move your magic there?"

"I don't... I'm not sure what you mean, Harry. I haven't tried to push my magic around at all, it just flows out of the wand when I use it."

"I thought you hadn't cast a spell yet?" Harry said in a mildly teasing tone. Hermione blushed, again. Why was he teasing her, she wondered?

"Well, I..." she temporized, "I may have tried one or two things on the sly, before we left the Leaky Cauldron. But I didn't glow."

Harry grinned. If she only knew..

"The Cauldron - Nice place, huh?"

Hermione wrinkled her nose a bit and shook her head in response. "Too run-down." She sat forward suddenly, eyes sharp, voice more insistent. "Hey, don't change the subject. How are you doing that thing with the magnet?"

Harry thought about it for a second. He was pretty sure he could trust her with a demonstration. It could be routinely explained away as magic here, which he found a novel concept.

"Here, I'll show you. Give me your hand."



She eyed him for a minute, pursed her lips, and offered her hand to Harry palm down. He released and palmed the magnet, then took her hand in both of this and turned it over. He placed the magnet on her open palm. The bright silver field of her aura surrounded it, but it did not move. Harry withdrew his hands.

"Push a little magic at it, Hermione."

Harry watched as something bloomed inside her chest, a luminous purple-silver light that flowed and expanded within her. It moved outward rather uniformly into all her extremities, but they were both watching her hand. Harry saw the denser cloud flowing like honey within the larger chrome cloud of her aura. It wound down her arm into her palm with a sound-feeling like chimes, and welled up under the magnet. The magnet, however, did not move, which didn't really surprise Harry. Magnets didn't repel magic. The luminous light receded back into her torso, but the glowing circlet remained.

"It didn't work," she whinged.

"Well, you got your magic to touch it, but you didn't ask it to do anything," Harry said, as if that were obvious.

Hermione tilted her head at him, again. Harry Potter had a very curious way of thinking.

"Do you trust me, Hermione?" She caught the undertones in the question. She stared into his green, green eyes for a long beat, then nodded. "Watch," he said.

Harry placed his left palm under her right, which still held the magnet. He pulled a bit of energy from the air around them and produced a visible (to him) white nimbus around their combined hands. He allowed a bit of his magic to flow and mix with the energy, just to guide the flow. He increased the energy flow, eliciting a little gasp from Hermione as she felt luminous white energy rise through her hand and out her palm. The magnet began to rise as Harry focused on controlling the field around their combined hands. They both watched the magnet rise over her palm. Harry breathed on it to start it in a wobbly spin. Focusing, he kept it floating for a count of ten, then reduced the energy flow, allowing the magnet to settle in Hermione's palm once more. He carefully lowered his hand from hers, which slowly closed around the magnet, but didn't otherwise

move. He slid back into his seat, head down for a breath to settle his energy. And that's when, not for the last time, something very odd happened around Harry Potter

As Hermione had not yet moved back, Harry risked a glance up at her. Tears were running down her cheeks. Her jaw was a bit slack, lips round in surprise, and her eyes were wide and vacant. Assuming he had hurt her somehow, Harry panicked, sat up rapidly and began to reflexively apologize.

"Hermione! I'm so sorry, Hermione, I didn't mean to hurt you! Are you okay? Oh god, oh god... Please say something, Hermione?" He was waiting for her to convulse, or faint, or start gushing blood. She blinked, and gave a tiny cough. Her vacant stare refocused. Two more tears slid down her face. As Harry watched, her expression of shock changed to one of...amazement?...happiness?...bliss? Harry was out of his depth here, never having had much experience recognizing the more positive emotions. She sniffed once, daintily, then exhaled slowly. Her eyes came to rest on his.

"I'm so sorry, Hermione! Did I hurt you? That was so stupid of me-" He cut off at a slight shake of her head. Then she...smiled at him?

"Are you alright? Do you need-"

She spoke softly, a tremor in her voice. "No, Harry. You didn't hurt me. Your...power, it sang to me. I heard it, in my head. It was so beautiful, like a church choir, or trumpets. And warm like sunshine.." she shook her head, at a loss for words. She sniffed again. "That was brilliant," she whispered, and wiped her eyes with her sleeve. She covered her eyes with her hands, and began to chuckle quietly, obviously still a bit flustered.

Harry deflated with relief, and started chuckling himself. She was okay. The pair chuckled themselves out, each embarrassed to look at the other. She was braver, and tilted her head forward to catch his downcast eyes.

"I'm okay, Harry; really. That just...surprised me, is all. It's not every day you hear something that beautiful. It caught me off guard."

"Really?"

"Yes. I'm fine!" After brief pause, she asked, "Here, do you want this back?", offering him the magnet.

"No, you keep that one." Apparently that was a good thing to have said, because Hermione beamed at him and clutched in to her chest. Her eyes were moist again.

"Thanks, Harry."

Harry stared out the window at the trees gliding by while Hermione took another moment to compose herself. Soon after, a knock at the door turned out to be the food service cart. They bought scones and hot tea in big paper cups from the elderly witch, who eyed them a bit dubiously. She'd spotted Hermione's state, apparently.

"You alright, young lady? This boy giving you any trouble?"

Taken aback, Harry stared at the service witch. Hermione, currently the quicker wit, answered. "No ma'am, he's been a perfect gentleman. Just an emotional day, that's all."

"Hmpf. Well, if he gives you any guff, just shout. I'll be right down the hall."

"Yes, ma'am. Thank you."

The service witch left them alone once again. Quiet filled the compartment. People rarely stood up for him, and her action had touched him. Harry couldn't meet her eyes as he said, "Thanks, Hermione." An awkward silence ensued.

"Harry, look at me." When he did, she continued, " I'm FINE, Harry. You just surprised me, is all. And it was a good surprise. So don't feel bad about it. Really."

"Thanks, Hermione. I just...I haven't had much reason to trust people. So thanks for sticking up for me, there."

Her head tilted at him again, the bright circlet rippling. Three seconds later she said quietly. "Your relatives - they were awful to you, weren't they?"

It was Harry's turn to gape at her. How in the world had she worked that out? And how should he respond? He could deny it, but he didn't really want to. He wanted to tell somebody; somebody who would care. But he'd only just met her

"How-" he began, only to be cut off by Hermione.

"Your clothes are four sizes too big, Harry. Your shoes are too big and worn through. Your glasses are taped together. Your relatives don't like magic. You don't have much reason to trust people. And don't take this the wrong way, but you're really small for your age, probably because of bad nutrition."

Now, Harry really goggled at her. And he thought he was reading HER like a book. That would teach him to underestimate Hermione Granger.

He blinked twice. "I, uh... I guess I can't disagree with any of that, Hermione."

A sad smile creased her mouth. She said "Fortunately, you have time away from them. Maybe you'll make some friends at school, and things will get better."

Harry shot her a lopsided grin. "At least I've got one, now."

She froze for a moment as his meaning sunk in - he wanted to be friends with her - HARRY POTTER wanted to be friends with her! Hermione blinked, and considered for a split second how odd life could be. Then she relaxed, flopping back into her seat. With a genuine smile, she met his eyes and nodded.

They snacked on scones and sipped tea in silence for a bit, each lost in their own thoughts. Each had found a friend, it seemed, who liked them for who they were. That was a fine place to be. Hermione cleared her throat, drawing Harry's glance. She tilted her head down a bit and looked at him over imaginary spectacles. Harry got the impression he was expected to be saying something. Oh, right. Relatives. But how much to say? She was eying him expectantly...something of the truth, then.

"Er, yeah." He pushed a hand through his spiky hair, making it slightly more disorderly. "Yeah, they were -they ARE- pretty awful. I

get hand-me-downs," -he plucked at his sweatshirt, "...from my whale of a cousin. I cook, I do all the chores, and they spoil him." Hermione just nodded, eyes locked to his. "Its awful, Hermione. They don't want me there, so they take it out on me to make me miserable. It sucks!" Harry didn't want to go into all the lousy details. She was still watching him. Harry's posture had changed; he had leaned forward, elbows on his knees, head hanging. "I'd rather not go into all the lousy details, Hermione. But it really, really sucks being there. I'd rather be almost anywhere else.

He took a moment to calm himself, and she pondered the enigma that was Harry Potter: Famous, powerful, insecure, lonely, possibly abused Harry Potter. The boy in front of her was nothing like the boy in those stories. Moving slowly, and with some hidden trepidation, Hermione stood up and crossed over to Harry's bench. She carefully sat down next to him. He took the cue and sat up so they were shoulder to shoulder. She bumped her shoulder into his. They were nearly the same height, sitting down. Harry didn't react, so she bumped him again, causing him to exhale a mirthless laugh and shake his head. She extended her hand to him, palm up. The significance of the gesture could not be overstated. Harry glanced at her hand, then at her eyes. She nodded once. He placed his hand in hers, intertwining their fingers. Sometimes, friendship was magical too. She spoke to him quietly. "Hey. Nothing lasts forever. It'll be alright, Harry. Things will change. People change. And new people come into our lives all the time.

He looked over at her, a sincere, intense expression in her eyes, white tiara of energy gleaming on her brow. She believed what she was saying. Harry let his head rock back against the seat. He squeezed her hand, and she squeezed back. After a beat, Harry said simply, "Thanks." Neither of them had held hands with anyone their own age before. It felt good, Harry decided. Hermione was thinking four different thoughts at that moment, including the observation that she was holding hands with the Boy Who Lived. What a very interesting day.

They had peace for almost three whole minutes, when a quick rap-rap at the door caused Harry to lift his head, open his eyes and glance in that direction along with Hermione. Perhaps it was the fact that he was relaxed and warm that resisted his return to full wakefulness, and that slowed him down a bit; or perhaps it was something else. But there they were side by side, his hand covering

hers, as two young boys entered the compartment. Each wore robes, one new, one not-so-new. The larger one had a round face, dark hair, and a worried expression. The shorter one had ginger hair. They appeared to want something. Hermione retracted her hand from Harry's with a blush.

Harry asked, "Can we help you?"

The redhead spoke. "Oh, sorry mate. Didn't mean to disturb you." He tilted his head toward his companion. "Neville here's lost a toad. Don't suppose you've seen one?"

Harry was pretty sure he would have seen a toad in the vicinity, given that every living thing in his field of vision glowed to one degree or another.

"No we haven't, sorry. Good luck, though. Toads like the sun, so check the sunny spots."

The redhead frowned and the taller boy drooped a little. Harry studied their energy clouds for a moment. The redhead's energy was a strong, simple column of orange-silver motes that hovered around him. The other boy had a large reservoir of red and gold energy twirling inside him, but only weak tendrils led off down his arms and legs.

"The other side of the train is getting the direct sun right now," Hermione observed correctly. The redhead nodded.

And then, a pair of flashing barber poles walked into the room. That's the only way Harry could describe them; two males, a bit older than himself, garishly dressed and sporting rotating columns of energy around them with bands of off-white and cherry red spiraling around them at a dizzying pace. Oddly, the left boy's energy spiraled right, and the right boy's energy spiraled left. It gave Harry a headache just looking at them. He reinforced the dampening on his energetic sight, before he got nauseated. The auras all faded to ghostly outlines.

"ello all, have no fear..." the right one said.

"..the wonderful Weasley twins are here!" finished the left one. Despite himself, Harry grinned. Obviously they were twins.

"Oh, firsties, eh?" the right one said.

"Let's introduce ourselves, then, dear brother..."

"Quite right, I'm Fred - " said the right one, "-and I'm George," said the left.

The dark-haired boy stuck out his hand and said "Neville Longbottom, of the House of Longbottom." Fred and George each took turns pumping his hand.

"And you?" They were addressing the shorter redhead.

"I'm your brother, you gits, knock it off!" he complained as they each shook one of his hands with exaggerated vigor. At the same time.

"Ah, little Ronniekins, all grown up and off to Hogwarts," the left twin said, wiping a fake tear from his eye. Neville and George grinned.

"And what about you two lovebirds over in the corner?" Fred asked. Four sets of eyes swiveled to Harry and Hermione, who stood at being addressed.

Hermione started to answer "We're not-"

Harry cut over her, saying, "We're not sure where your toad is, Neville. But this is my friend Hermione Granger and I'm Harry Potter. We're first years." Hermione blushed; no one had ever referred to her in that way before. Harry then witnessed his first group goggling, because all four males were staring at him with more than a bit of awe. Four pairs of eyes tracked from his face, to his forehead, to the famous scar. The rightmost twin recovered first.

"Blimey...it's Harry Potter!"

All four of them then attempted to introduce themselves and shake his hand, simultaneously. This greatly amused Hermione, who had already shifted to a very personal impression of Harry as Harry, not as the famous celebrity

Fred and George were actually holding their little brother back with one hand apiece as they rushed forward to meet The Boy Who Lived.

Harry got to officially meet Ron, George (left-hand twist), Fred (right-hand twist) and Neville, who was shy but in whom Harry could see great potential. They all shook Hermione's hand as well, and Neville blushed when it was his turn. The twins's reputation as pranksters was reiterated for the benefit of the first years. The meeting was kept short, as there was a toad to find, but they agreed to meet up again at the feast.

The visitors trooped out for toad patrol, and Harry and Hermione had the compartment to themselves again. Hermione had taken notice of what Harry had done during the introductions, intentionally not correcting the mistaken impression that they were a couple. Why had he done that? Did he want it believed that he had a girlfriend? DID he want a girlfriend? Did she want a boyfriend? How was her hair? Such were the concurrent thoughts of the future brightest witch of her age, when a pair of startling green eyes stepped right in front of her. She worked not to catch her breath in surprise.

"Hermione, I said what I said to them because I want them to know you're my friend. I don't want to see you picked on because of your non-magical parents, or be the butt of jokes. I don't mind using my reputation to protect my friends. I hope you're not angry with me?"

Oh; that's what he'd meant. He was trying to protect her from bullying. Hermione knew a thing or two about bullies, and she was certain Harry did, too. That realization punctured her wild speculations about romance. He thought of her as a friend, and she wanted a friend more than anything right now.

"No Harry, I'm not angry. I'd be pleased to be your friend," she added with a little smile.

She got a rare full smile from him then, and one word: "Brilliant!" That smile was gorgeous, and caused a funny feeling in her chest. They sat down once again. The scones were gone but she had a bit of tea left in the big paper cup. Hermione took a sip and promptly defamed it.

"Ugh...tea's gone cold. Bad luck."



"Here, let me heat that for you." Harry reached over and touched the cup with a fingertip, being careful to avoid Hermione's hand. His fingertip began glow from within and without in gentle white light. Hermione could feel the heat radiating from his hand. In a few more seconds steam was once again rising from the cup. Hermione goggled a bit at the now-steaming tea, and missed Harry rubbing his hands briskly on his thighs, melting away a thin layer of frost inexplicably gathered there.

"...Thanks, Harry."

"No problem, Hermione."

"That wasn't magic either, was it?"

"Ah, no. Just energy."

"Energy? What do you -"

Hermione's question was cut off as the door slid open with a bang, and three different boys strode in. Harry recognized the pale boy at the front; the other two were unknown to him, but he recognized the gang-leader-with-thugs formation from his wonderful home life. The pale boy's slinky-ring aura was spinning faintly around him. The left thug had a big anthropomorphic energy cloud around him shaped vaguely like a gorilla; very fitting, Harry thought. The right thug had a clumpy silver-green energy around him that resembled broccoli. 'Oh,' thought Harry, '...right. He's a vegetable.'

The pale boy was speaking in an arrogant tone. "...were saying that Harry Potter is on this train. Is that you?"

Harry did not like bullies; not one ounce, not one gram, not one atom. He rose and stood as straight as possible, between Hermione and the three of them. The blonde was an inch taller. He could practically ride the other two.

"That's me."

The pale boy's eyes widened a fraction in recognition. "That was you, at Madam Malkins!"

"Yep."

"Why didn't you introduce yourself?" the boy asked in the slightly miffed tone of one used to getting what he wants.

Harry kept his voice neutral. "Why didn't you? And by the way, who are you, exactly?"

Meanwhile, Harry was acting on multiple fronts. He was hand-signaling Hermione to get behind him, which she was indeed doing as she'd also picked up the confrontational vibe from their visitors. Harry was Pulling energy in from the direction of the blonde and his goons, dropping the air temperature in that area of the compartment by a good ten degrees so far. Holding all that energy was challenging, but Harry was managing. The skin on the left goon's neck had broken out into goose flesh at the chill. Lastly, Harry was gathering his own blue magic, moving it up into his voice, eyes and ears. He wanted to sense everything that was going on, the moment it changed.

"Oh, you don't recognize me? Everybody knows the Malfoy family," the boy declaimed, emphasizing the name as if it should mean something to Harry. "I'm Draco, Draco Malfoy," the boy said, extending his hand toward Harry.

"Harry Potter. Pleased to meet you," Harry said, lying through his teeth. He shook the offered hand. Harry siphoned off more heat. The gathered energy thrummed inside him.

"Hm. This is Crabbe" -he nodded to his left, then to his right - "and Goyle."

Draco proceed to make some pitch about certain families being better than others, and helping Harry navigate wizarding society, and blood status being paramount to one's standing, and generally asserting his superiority. Harry listened with half an ear and crossed arms. He was in fact focusing on two things: Pulling enough heat from these goons to make them uncomfortable, and trying NOT to barbecue Hermione, who was sitting directly behind him. He was succeeding at both things admirably, so far. The ambient temperature in front of Harry had so far dropped a good fifteen to twenty degrees. Goon number one was shivering a bit.

However, the amount of energy he was taking in was enormous. Holding it in check made his bones start to buzz. Malfoy was a long-winded little snot.

The fact that Malfoy had never acknowledged Hermione wasn't lost on Harry. Apparently he was here on a recruiting mission. His swirling energetic signature had developed an additional greasy brown element as he spouted on to Harry. Harry wondered if the boy believed half of what he was saying, because it sure didn't look healthy to Harry.

Draco concluded his big pitch with the statement "You don't want to go making friends with the wrong sort, Potter. I can help you there." Harry thought he'd rather eat bugs, but he was trying to avoid conflict here.

So instead, Harry said, "I see. You've given me a lot to think about, Draco. How about we talk again later?"

"Very good, Potter. We'll speak again after the feast," Draco said with satisfaction. He'd obviously taken Harry's non-answer for agreement.

"Oh, Who's that?" Draco asked, nodding towards Hermione now that his mission is accomplished.

Harry took just a quarter-step to the left, allowing eye contact between Draco and Hermione.

He slid power into his voice and said "This is my good friend Hermione. I would be very upset if anything happened to her, Draco." Harry Pulled a burst of heat from Draco's direction, focused low along at the carpeted floor, which promptly frosted over, along with the boys' shoes and the cuffs of their pants.

All three of them looked down in response to an odd crackling sound. Draco's eyes widened in understanding; the goons just looked confused. Three pairs of eyes looked back to Harry, who had planned it just this way. He allowed a bit of his blue magic to color his eyes through, giving the impression of one with power over ice and snow - a weather elemental, or storm god.

"Do we have an understanding?" Harry asked, voice resonant, eyes glowing. God, he loved this part.

Draco blinked. "Uh..yes...yes, we do, Potter. T-thanks for your time. We'll see you later, then." Draco made a hasty retreat, goons in tow. Frost crunched crunched under their shoes as they left. When the door shut behind them, Harry let go the breath he'd been holding and sagged a bit. He turned to the window, lowered it rapidly, and stuck his hand outside. He started bleeding off energy as heat into the air streaming by the train. His hand was incandescent and the air around it rippled with heat distortion. Harry suspected if they were stationary, he'd have a fireball going right about now, but the train was steaming along at 70MPH, so this was working just fine. He sighed as the buzzing in his bones began to subside. As he stood there, one hand out the window in the airstream and the other against the wall holding himself up, a bushy-haired witch inserted herself between him and the window, eyes full of questions and an unspoken threat should the answers not be good ones.

"Hi, Hermione. How are you?" Harry deadpanned. His fatigue was slurring his speech a bit.

Her look shifted to concerned, and she asked "Harry...are you ok? What you did..."

Eyes closed, he inhaled deeply once. Friends deserved answers. He opened his eyes and looked into hers.

"I'll be fine, Hermione. I'm just tired, is all."

"You're sure?" she asked, chocolate eyes peering up into his very green ones.

"Pretty sure, yeah. Look, I apologize again for-"

"Don't, Harry. You were right to stand up to those three. They were bullies, I could smell it on them. If I knew a decent spell or two..." She groused.

"Oh, we will. I assure you, we will," Harry nodded to her.

"Why don't you sit, Harry?"

"I, uh... I can't, yet." He waved the glowing hand around outside the window to emphasize his point.

Hermione's eyes went wide again as she remembered what she'd seen earlier.

"Harry, What. Did. You. Do! How was that possible?"

Harry grinned tiredly at her. She really was tenacious. "Hermione, we are less than an hour from Hogwarts, correct?"

She checked her wristwatch, which was currently still worked, and said "Thirty-five minutes, actually. Why?"

"Because I want to have a serious conversation with you about things, and it will take more than thirty-five minutes. Would you agree to meet me and talk after the feast tonight?"

Hermione worried her lip and thought it over. She trusted this boy, mostly. He'd proven himself capable of defending himself and her. And he'd repeatedly referred to her as his friend. Friends supported one another. She nodded.

"Okay, Harry. It can wait until after the feast. But you. owe. me. answers. Mister!" This last was said with gentle pokes of her finger to his chest.

"Yes, Hermione."

She gave him one last look and extracted herself from her spot in front of Harry. She marched over to her trunk to extract her robes, as they were not far now.

Harry pulled his hand back inside the window, finally. There were heat scorch marks along the roof of the Express where the wind had carried the superheated air along the edge of the train. The paint was bubbled the wooden window frames of his window, and the next two after that. 'Ugh. Setting the Hogwarts Express on fire would be bad,' Harry thought to himself with a shake of his head.

To Hermione's back he said "I need the loo. Back in a minute." He missed her startled glance at the charred footprints where he'd been standing during the confrontation. She just stared for a second, then

shook her head at her new friend's life. She surmised that lots of very odd things tended to happen around Harry Potter. With about ten minutes left in the ride they were joined by Ron and a much happier Neville, who had indeed found his toad. They chatted about the sorting, and houses, and Harry's friend Hagrid.

The train arrived within one minute of the proscribed time, and they all piled out, belongings left aboard to be transported in some way Harry could only guess. Maybe 'elves' took them. Hagrid gathered the first years as usual, and greeted Harry by name. He led them down a path to the edge of a lake. Harry had been glancing up at the brilliant night sky of rural Scotland, when a chorus of "Ooooooh" caused him to look forward again. To normal students, Hogwarts was beautiful at night, a dark silhouette with windows shining. To Harry, it was a beacon. The entire structure glowed as if constructed of luminous crystal. He had never seen anything so beautiful in his life.

They climbed into the boats, four apiece, for a gentle cruise across the lake. Harry could see the charm on the otherwise ordinary boats, right at the front. Harry rode with Ron, Hermione and Neville. As they neared the castle, Harry had to readjust his eyes twice due to the energetic brightness. But he didn't really mind, as this was possibly the greatest day of his young life. He had a friend-who-was-a-girl, and two more mates than he did this morning. He had a magical castle to call home. And he had a beautiful owl, who had swooped out of the sky to land on his shoulder shortly into the boat ride. She was luminous at night in her own right, and nearly every eye watched her circle twice overhead before angling down to boat number 7.

"Hello Girl! I missed you so much, you pretty thing!" Harry said to Hedwig, who nipped his ear affectionately. Hermione blushed to hear those words from Harry, even not directed at her.

"Whoa, nice owl, Harry!" Ron supplied.

"Thanks, Ron. Her name is Hedwig."

"From the German?" Hermione asked.

"After the famous Hollyhead Harpie's keeper?" Ron countered.

"Both," Harry answered with a grin.

Harry introduced Hedwig to each of them in turn. Hedwig stared at Hermione as she sat beside Harry for a long beat, and then shuffled over to sit on Hermione's shoulder. This surprised Hermione and amused Harry to no end. "I guess she likes you," Harry said.

"Apparently."

Harry marveled for a moment at the similar energies coming off the girl and the owl as they both looked at him

"Well, she has good taste. She's MY owl, after all..." Harry said with an exaggerated voice to emphasize his attempt at humor. The boat's occupants chuckled.

Eventually they landed at the castle harbor, clambered out, and trooped up a long flight of steps to the huge front doors. Harry sent Hedwig off to the owlery with a few kind words. Hagrid knocked loudly on the massive oaken doors, which swung open at once to reveal a tall, dark-haired witch in emerald robes. But that's not all Harry Potter saw.

## CH09: Two Birds Rising

Standing before the massive castle doors, Harry got his first look at the magic of Hogwarts. The massive stones were lit from within with a faint golden light, brighter at the mortar lines. 'Maybe spells to resist water?' Harry supposed. Layers upon layers of translucent radiance in different shades of blue, green and gold surrounded the walls, humming gently - wards, Harry assumed from his readings. What their purpose was he could only guess. He could feel others humming in the steps below his feet. Curious, he watched as little gold motes scoured his shoes and those of his companions. Ah, a cleaning spell.

The whole castle seemed to be humming a gentle, deep-voiced tune, now that Harry listened carefully for it. Four or five notes cycled at random like upright basses playing in soft harmony. Underneath it all was a slow, deep pulse at eight or ten second intervals that reminded Harry of slow inhalations and exhalations. The castle was practically alive, it seemed, with all the magic saturating it.

The huge oaken doors were criss-crossed with bands of gold, scarlet and silver radiance that pulsed as Hagrid approached. Wavelets flowed away from his hand each time knocked, like ripples on a disturbed pond. They swung open to reveal a most exceptional looking witch in an emerald robe, slender and tall with dark brown hair worn in a compact bun. Her posture was remarkably straight, her expression stern but with a touch of a smile. To Harry's senses, she had a tall, solid, precise shaft of radiant pale yellow at her core, limbed in orange fire. Around her, though, was a translucent silver energy nimbus that resembled a two meter tall cat sitting on its haunches. Tufts decorated its ears, and its short tail flicked left and right animatedly as it studied them curiously. Harry goggled. Her outward appearance was utterly calm and poised, but playful energy rippled around her. Harry would later identify the cat-shape as a lynx. Her magic...sounded good to Harry, genuine, three pure notes in harmony. Her magic was more solid than that of the children he'd been around all day, more crisp in its patterns. Maybe it was her age, or her magical strength, Harry guessed.

Hermione had been watching Harry study the walls and the doors with a rather intense gaze, which shifted to the witch in front of them as the doors opened.

"That's McGonagall," she whispered to a seemingly distracted Harry.

"Wow," she heard Harry whisper. What was he marveling at? She saw a big stone room and Professor McGonagall standing there in the torchlight, looking pleased and a bit stern. What was he on about?

"Follow me, please, children," McGonagall said in a light Scots burr. They were being led across the entry hall to a small antechamber, presumably for further instructions. As the students in front of them shuffled forward, she and Harry moved to follow. Harry's first step onto the floor seemed to falter, and he teetered for a moment with a very odd expression on his face. Neville came to the rescue with a hand under Harry's arm, hauling him upright.

"Alright there, Harry?" Neville asked.

"Uh... yeah, thanks Neville, I... just got clumsy there, for a minute..."



"Sure thing, Harry. Happens to me all the time." He steadied Harry on his feet and stepped away to catch up with Ron. Harry still looked a bit dazed.

She threaded her arm through his to keep him walking in a straight line. He seemed to be recovering from whatever happened. She leaned towards him and whispered, "Are you alright? What's going on with you?"

Harry was still trying to understand that, himself. When he'd stepped over the threshold onto the castle floor...Wow. The magic that hugged the castle floor in a luminous layer a few inches deep had washed up over him, toe to head, in a ripple of sound and sensation that raised the hair on his arms. It was...complex, and multi-timbered, like a whole orchestra playing a E major chord at maximum volume. All the harmonics and overtones rang in his mind. It was a mild touch of power, fortunately, but jumping into a swift-moving river will still knock you over. Harry felt one knee give out, and he wobbled precariously until a hand threaded under his arm to right him. When he got both feet firmly on the ground again, the castle's magic seemed to redistribute between both feet and settle a bit, coming to rest about halfway up his shoes. He was literally standing in magic. Cautiously, Harry directed his own blue magic around his ears and eyes to dampen the magical glare and noise, something he'd learned to do out of necessity that morning on Diagon alley. That helped immensely, and Harry slowly phased into tune with the castle's energetic currents. In hindsight, Harry would liken it to jumping into a flowing river and figuring out how to move with the flow.

He became aware of someone guiding him forward, and glanced to his right to find Hermione leading him after the others towards a smaller room off the main entryway. They slid in towards the back as McGonnagall addressed the group. She officially welcomed them all to Hogwarts, and explained the agenda for the evening, including sorting each of them into one of four houses. The houses and house cup were explained, followed by a sketch of the rest of the night's agenda. She informed them all that in keeping with tradition, the Sorting Ceremony was to begin shortly in front of the entire school, who were presently in the Great Hall. McGonnagall concluded with the suggestion that they all "smartened themselves up as much as they can" while they were waiting. They were told to wait quietly until she returned for them. Several students took to making themselves look

presentable. Hermione waved Ron over, stretched her sleeve into her palm, and cleaned a spot of dirt off his nose. He mumbled a thanks, red-eared with embarrassment. Harry pushed his hair back with one hand, fruitlessly. It mostly did what it wanted, anyway.

A commotion caused Harry to turn around, only to see...ghosts, apparently, drifting through the walls to surprise and greet the first years. To Harry they looked like faintly radiant clouds with no person in the middle. Which is what they were, he supposed.

McGonnagall returned and dismissed the ghosts. She ordered the students to line up in preparation for the traditional procession into the hall. Harry ended up with Neville in front and Hermione behind. Neville was looking a bit peaked. He glanced over his shoulder to Harry and spoke.

"Uh, Harry...some of the others were talking about a test or a trial by magic to be sorted...do you think they'll make us do that?"

Harry pushed his lip sideways and thought about it. "Not likely. I mean, we haven't learned a single spell yet, officially. We're not really prepared for much, are we?"

Neville started a bit in revelation, and then visibly relaxed. He shot Harry a self-conscious grin. "Ah...good thinking, Harry. You're right - we can't be expected to know much, yet. We just got here!" He exhaled slowly. "Thanks, Harry." He looked much less pale, now, as he faced front again, pulling his robes straight.

McGonnagall called for silence, and they were led in procession in to the Great Hall. The older students occupied the long parallel tables on either side, and a raised dais at the far end held what Harry assumed was the faculty table. They were led down the center of the room to a point near the front, where a wooden stool sat topped by a patched and ragged wizard's hat of ancient tan leather.

Quite a few stumbles and collisions resulted from children not looking where they were going, as they were too busy staring at the enchanted ceiling. Hermione was discussing it avidly with the blonde girl behind her. Harry was taken aback by the ceiling as well, for a different reason; it sang to those under it. He heard something like woodwinds and a boy's choir singing a wordless melody. It was...celestial, Harry supposed, and very, very peaceful. Great

swirling galaxies drifted overhead, timeless and serene. What a beautiful piece of magic. He blinked a few times very slowly to clear his vision. Curiously, the formations were not superimposed with magic; they WERE magic, made visible. They looked the same to Harry, eyes open or closed. Huh. He'd read about it, but Hogwarts, a History didn't do the ceiling justice. A rather odd voice drew him back to the activities up front.

Apparently, magical hats can sing. Harry tilted his head at the patched hat addressing the entire school. It was heavily enchanted, Harry was sure, given the radiance pouring off of it. It was singing something about bravery, loyalty, ambition, wits, and working together. Harry knew the purported house traits already from his reading, and the hat was echoing that back now. He honestly had no idea where he might fit best, excluding slytherin; He refused to go to slytherin, but the other three were fine as far as he was concerned.

McGonagall's voice caught his attention as she called out "Abbot, Hannah." The little girl with the duck-like aura stepped forward, climbed the stool and had the hat placed on her head. A radiant halo bloomed around her head, and Harry heard disjointed noise from that direction. This continued for another ten seconds until the hat shouted "Hufflepuff!", which drew polite applause from the audience. So that was it? They put on a sentient hat, and it decided where they went? What kind of a system was that.

And so it went, alphabetically through the first years. Harry took a moment to study the faculty table. At the nearest end sat Hagrid, who gave him a thumbs-up when he caught his eye. Next to him was an older man in outdoor clothing missing an eye and part of a hand, although Harry could see the faint outlines of radiance sketching them in. In the third spot was a rather attractive witch with long, straight black hair and a round, smiling face. Her aura was actually comprised of shifting rectangles that slid back and forth to mesh with one another; oddly geometrical. She was talking to a woman in saffron robes and large glasses; Harry saw virtually no magic coming from her. In the fifth chair sat a small... man?...goblin?...Harry couldn't tell, except that his aura resembled a larger, softer version of the cactus-auras the goblins at Gringotts radiated. A hybrid perhaps.

Next to him sat a severe looking man with stringy black hair, jet black robes, and a large hooked nose. His anthracite eyes were

sweeping over the room. A smoky silver radiance coiled about him, tinged through with rippling black streaks that orbited around him. An egg-like outer layer of translucent indigo surrounded him as a sort of barrier, fueled by the swirling smoke within. Some type of shield, Harry surmised. His eyes met Harry's and glittered with malice. Harry had seen that look often enough on people intending to do him harm. This man was to be watched, carefully.

His attention was redirected by McGonnagall calling "Granger, Hermione!"

Hermione practically sprinted forward and hopped up onto the high stool. McGonnagall lowered the hat to her head. It had barely touched when Harry felt a magical pulse that sounded to him like a distorted "Oh, my!", and then the hat opened its brim wide to shout "Ravenclaw!"

A round of applause welcomed Hermione to the 'smart' table. Harry rolled his eyes; where else would she go, really?

"Greengrass, Daphne!" went to Slytherin. She had perhaps the most beautiful radiance Harry had ever seen, like a sculptured bird soaring upwards

At the faculty table, the seventh chair was occupied by a thin man wearing a turban, which seemed a bit odd to Harry, but his radiance was truly alarming: A silver-blue swirl of energy resided in his torso, tendrils reaching up to a swirling black mass centered over the man's head. 'What the hell was that', Harry wondered. It appeared to be parasitically consuming him via the energetic tendrils to his core. Harry winced in sympathy and revulsion - that looked painful and unpleasant.

The eighth chair was empty, presumably for McGonnagall. In the last chair sat a grandfatherly old man in bright blue robes decorated with swirling stars. His long silver beard and spectacles shone. He observed the proceedings with a benevolent smile and occasional applause as children were sorted. He applauded, and nodded, and smiled, and he scared the bejezzus out of Harry Potter.

Harry gaped at the old man - the headmaster, if his books were right - and tried to fathom what he was seeing in the man's energy. Half a dozen luminous scarlet-silver creatures three meters long glided in

lazy loops around the man, prowling and watching their environment. Sharks, Harry concluded; there were sharks ten feet long schooling around the headmaster. Most swam lazily around him, heads turning side to side occasionally. They swam through the old man periodically; Harry wondered what that felt like. Within the man's body Harry saw a large core of molten light the same color as the sharks, pulsing steadily like a heartbeat. Green and blue trails of light danced across the man's core periodically. Hogwarts' own magic coiled up around the headmaster's feet, much higher than anyone else's in the room. Harry quivered a bit at the sight. This was clearly a very powerful and dangerous man. The energy there didn't look dark, precisely, but more...predatory, brimming with awareness and potential lethality. Harry understood now why his Modern Wizardry book made frequent mention of Dumbledore's power; you crossed this man at your extreme peril. Harry shivered a bit and wrenched his eyes away. 'Note to self,' Harry thought: 'Don't piss off Dumbledore unless absolutely necessary.'

"Longbottom, Neville!" went to Gryffindor, and seemed very pleased about it. Harry caught Hermione's eye at the Ravenclaw table. She winked and pointed at him, then at the empty seat beside her while giving him a look. 'Well, she's made HER wishes known', Harry thought. He started humming "You Can't Always Get What You Want", just because it seemed appropriate.

"Malfoy, Draco!" went to Slytherin in a heartbeat, unsurprisingly.

"Poseman, Gerald!" went to Hufflepuff, and unless Harry was much mistaken, he was next.

"Potter, Harry!"

The whole hall broke out in whispered conversations, a few pointing at him, others a distance away actually standing up to get a look at him. All the faculty's eyes were on him. Dumbledore's 'sharks' were hovering, having stopped their lazy circles.

Harry approached the stool and sat. McGonagall lowered it onto his head and as it landed, covering his eyes a bit, the noise and glare from the school abruptly cut off. Harry started at the abrupt silence in his mind; things were rarely this quiet in his perceptions. And that's when, not for the last time, something very odd happened to Harry Potter.

A wave of magic began Pulling at him, which panicked Harry on a primal level. The sensation caused his instincts and adrenaline to spike and he Pulled back hard against whatever it was. Harry heard a little pop, and the hat flopped over on his head. Harry Potter had /killed/ the Sorting Hat

Or maybe not. Three or four seconds later, Harry heard an identical pop and the Hat shifted on his head. Harry resumed breathing, trying to calm himself down.

"Ouch. Please don't do that again, Mister Potter," said the Hat's voice in his head.

"Er...Sorry. You sort of startled me, there."

"Evidently. It's been over eighty years since a first-year canceled my spell."

"Is that what I did?" Harry asked, honestly curious.

"Were you not aware?"

"No, actually. I felt magic pulling at me, so I Pulled back."

A sarcastic tone colored Hat's voice. "Obviously."

The hat paused, and then said, "With your permission, Mister Potter, I need to examine some of your memories and judgments to see where best to sort you. I assure you that we have complete confidentiality. I would very much appreciate it if you wouldn't cancel my spell again."

"...alright.

Harry felt the pull again, and he squashed his instinct to Pull back from it. He saw dozens of memories flash by in seconds- the Siskin; his trip to Diagon Alley; the Dudley Incident; the train-ride; and right up to his entering the castle this very night. The memory of perceiving Dumbledore's aura was front and center on his metal screen. The Hat seemed to be thinking, as the pulling sensation had all but stopped.

"Oh, My."

Harry waited for a count of ten.

"Mister, uh...Hat?"

"Hat will do, Mister Potter. You are an exceptional young wizard."

"...thanks, I guess."

Another pause, then: "Do not concern yourself with your magical strength, Mister Potter. You have access to far more magical power than you realize."

"er...right. Thanks."

"Your other gift, this moving energy...I've not seen anything like that before, Mister Potter; and at my age, that IS saying something."

Harry sighed, which the Hat evidently heard.

"You wish to understand it, Mister Potter, and make use of it. That will require much study and research. Unique skills are not mastered lightly."

"...I guess."

"Indeed. And the house best suited to study in the pursuit of understanding is undoubtedly..."

"...Ravenclaw!" Harry heard the hat shout to the room at large. Harry removed the hat and twitched as all the magical glare slammed back into his senses. Oddly, the room was nearly silent, but for some vague murmurs. The entire student body was staring at him, as were most of the faculty.

"Take your seat, Mister Potter," McGonnagall ordered. That broke the tableau and Harry strode over to the Ravenclaw table amidst reserved applause. He dropped into the seat next to Hermione, and was welcomed by a handful of the older students including the prefects, one Anthony Goldstein and one Penelope Clearwater. After the introductions were complete, Harry felt a hand on his arm

and turned to Hermione, who said "What took the Hat so long with you? You were there for nearly ten minutes!"

Harry started a bit at that. "Was I? I didn't...well... we sort of had to start over."

Hermione raised an eyebrow at him, prompting further explanation. Harry sighed.

"Ok, so McGonagall dropped the hat on my head, and it didn't speak to me, it just started pulling on my memories. I panicked because it... I panicked, and I sort of Pulled back on the magic, and ...shut off the Sorting Hat."

Hermione's eyes went very wide. "That's a priceless magical artifact, Harry! Gryffindor and Ravenclaw enchanted that hat themselves! You can't just turn it off!"

Harry sighed. "Apparently I did, because it popped back on a few seconds later, and told me not to do it again." Hermione's jaw went slack at that.

"Anyway, the hat got what it needed the second time, and then we talked, and it put me in Ravenclaw. Simple!" Harry said, spreading his hands in a 'there you go' kind of gesture.

Hermione closed her eyes and pinched the bridge of her nose while shaking her head. Harry bumped his shoulder into hers, twice, to get her to smile.

"Weasley, Ronald!" went to Gryffindor, to join his three brothers.

"Wright, Steven!" came to Ravenclaw, and that completed the sorting.

Dumbledore then rose to speak. His sharks were swimming in perfect synchrony in parallel rings around him, like trained dolphins. He welcomed them all to Hogwarts like a great grandfather, and declared his intention to say a few words. "And here they are: Resolution! Revolution! Resonance! Gecko!" He paused. "Thank you." And with that he sat back down.



Harry and Hermione shared a confused look. Harry turned to the older boy on his other side and asked "Pardon, but is Dumbledore - a bit mad?"

Terry Boot answered: "Mad? He's a genius! Best NEWT scores ever! ...but yes, he is a bit mad. Chicken, Harry?" Harry gasped as right on cue, the biggest meal Harry had ever seen appeared in a sparkle of magic. Harry grinned.

The meal progressed as Harry got to know his nearby housemates: Terry was a third year from Muggle parents; Michael Corner was a fourth year from a wholly magical family. The Ravenclaw first years included Hermione, Lisa Turpin, Kelly Bloom and Padma Patil for the girls, and Harry, Steven Wright, Richard Clarkson, and Jeremy Hammond for the boys. Terry was proving to be a wealth of information already, identifying the instructors by name and discipline. Harry's heart sank when he learned the dark-eyed man taught potions. Bad luck.

As the dessert course appeared, Harry spoke to Hermione about joining Neville and Ron at the Gryffindor table. As the older students began to depart, they saw their chance and crossed the isle to where Ron and Neville sat across from one another.

Harry spoke. "Hey guys! Awesome dinner, yeah? Mind if we join you for a pudding?"

Ron shrugged and budged over, his mouth full of cake. Harry took that seat while Neville made room for Hermione.

"Alright there, Neville?" Harry asked.

"Yep, very good, thanks Harry. I'm pleased to be in Gryffindor like my parents were." Harry pushed his hand through his hair. Why didn't he know which house his parents had been in?

"Right...well good for you, Neville. Well done."

Hermione spoke up: "Everything good, Ron?" He answered her with a nod and a thumbs-up. Ron was putting cake ahead of conversation.

Hermione rolled her eyes at him and turned back to Neville's conversation with Percy Weasley, Gryffindor perfect.

And that's when something very odd happened around Hermione Granger. A distinct and intense wave of heat rolled into her legs from the direction of the other side of the table. Neville had felt it as well, and they both started upright, then leaned back to peer under the table, suspecting perhaps a ghost or the pranking poltergeist they'd been warned about. There was nothing unusual under the table, however, so as one they glanced across the table to Ron and Harry.

Ron was poised with his fork in mid-lift, mouth open, head turned to look at Harry and his brothers. The twins were standing behind Harry, one over each shoulder, each staring at a frost-covered hand with identical expressions of shock and amusement. Just from their positions it was evident to Hermione they had clapped Harry on the shoulders and gotten their hands frozen. Harry's eyes were closed, head in one hand propped up on an elbow on the table, shaking his head slowly.

"er...sorry about that, guys... you surprised me, is all."

The twins were chuckling now, each rubbing his hands together to warm them up. Fred blew into his palms and rubbed some more.

"No harm done, Harry, just a little frost. That's a neat trick!" said Fred.

The other twin had his chilled hand under his armpit. "Yeah, Harry, how'd you do it?"

Harry shrugged, caught Hermione's eyes on him, and winked at her. "Uh...magic?"

The twins both snorted simultaneously. Harry wondered how exactly they managed that. Then, George proclaimed, "Harry Potter pranks the Weasley twins on his first day at Hogwarts! We have a prankster in the making here. Clearly this boy's in need of some guidance, eh Forge?"

"Right you are, Gred. Harry m' boy, if you're going to be pranking, there are much better targets around that us!"

"But I... didn't...", Harry trailed off, realizing it was a losing battle and just shrugged, which gave Hermione the giggles.

"As it is, we owe you one now, Harry!" Fred said.

Harry rolled his eyes. Better to take his medicine. "Fair enough, I will hereby submit to one Weasley Twins pranking. But," Harry held up a finger, " I stipulate that it be on me, and me only, and last no longer than 24 hours."

The twins shared a look, then a grin. "Deal!" they said in stereo. Everyone within earshot grinned, although Harry's was a bit sardonic.

Hermione watched one of the twins bent down to speak in Harry's ear and point at the faculty table. Harry nodded, then looked surprisedly at the twin, then back at the head table. She couldn't tell what was said, but she was pretty sure it was serious. Percy asked her a question, and she missed the end of that little conversation. Soon after, the dessert trays disappeared, much to Ron's dismay. Ron was deeply, passionately committed to cake. Harry and Hermione agreed to meet up with their year-mates tomorrow morning, and rejoined their house for the march to Ravenclaw tower.

The Ravenclaw entrance was not particularly hard to find. One had to climb a spiral staircase to a door guarded by a bespelled bronze Eagle, which functioned as both lock and door knocker. To enter, one had to solve a riddle or puzzle.

"How very typically Ravenclaw," Harry observed to Hermione, who glared lightly at him.

"What? I like it!"

"How hard could it BE?" asked Clarkson.

"Don't say that!" replied Hammond.

The prefects showed them around. The common room was fantastic; round, of course, with two fireplaces on the inside walls, and a wide assortment of couches, chairs and tables on which to study. The ceiling was painted with constellations and stars. Around

the majority of the wall was a narrow curved platform that supported endless groaning bookshelves reaching seven full stories upwards. Each story had its own suspended walkway, and rolling ladders to access the books on that level. A balcony covered about a third of the second level, offering more workspace.

The enchantments on the ladders and many of the books were obvious to Harry, glowing in hues of indigo, purple and scarlet. An orange rectangle, obviously a door, lurked behind a bookcase on the right. Harry thought that especially interesting. Additional spiral staircases led up to the boys and girls dormitories, respectively. It was, in short, bookworm heaven. Harry could tell, because Hermione was practically incandescent with joy at the sight of all those books and a place to read them.

Harry noticed something odd, then, occupying a leather chair off in the far radius (for there were no corners) of the room. A little opaque orange cloud of energy obscured his energetic sight, something Harry found unusual. It did, however pulse as if breathing, or perhaps...with a heartbeat

Harry approached Prefect Anthony Goldstein, garnered his attention and asked "Who's that?" while indicating the faraway chair.

Anthony grinned. "Well done, Potter. Five points to Boys!"

"Sorry?"

Addressing the group of eight firsties, Anthony said "Ladies and Gentlemen, please welcome your head of House and Charms Master, Professor Filius Flitwick."

The professor dismissed the obscuring charm and appeared (to all but Harry) to fade into view from thin air, receiving many "ooooos" and "ahhhhhhs" as he did so.

They applauded politely as Flitwick approached and mounted a small wooden library step to better address them. His radiance bespoke of goblin ancestry to Harry, as did his stature. The keen mind there soon became obvious also.

"Welcome to House Ravenclaw, everyone. I am most pleased to have you among us," Flitwick began. He went on to cover the house

rules, procedures for obtaining tutoring, study schedules, book borrowing procedures, and everything else a bookworm might want to know. Apparently, Ravenclaw House also ran a friendly boys vs. girls competition, with a point scheme similar to the house point scheme. The winner got a fifty-galleon gift certificate for Flourish & Botts, as well as ten hours of private tutoring from the Professor on any topic they wished. The latter incentive was enough to motivate Harry to try; he wanted to know what Flitwick knew about Goblin magic.

The professor was just concluding,"... anytime, and normally we have a little tradition for a contest to see who amongst the first years can locate me soonest in the tower. But Mister Potter seems to have managed that already. Well done, Harry." All eyes swiveled to him. He nodded to the professor in acknowledgment.

The professor bid them all a pleasant evening and answered a few questions. A moment later he approached Harry. He was one of the few people Harry didn't have to look up to, physically.

"Well done, Mister Potter. I'm curious, though, I was watching all of you, and you did not appear to cast a spell, nor did I feel one. How did you locate me?"

Harry took a moment to assess how forthright he could be with his new Professor. He knew of the man's reputation, and his energetic signature did not contain the color-tones Harry had come to associate with deception or malicious intent.

"May I speak in confidence, professor?"

Flitwick's eyebrows rose. He waved a spell around them, and Harry perceived a cylindrical wall of shimmering crimson beads rise around them

"You may now, Mister Potter." Points to Flitwick for being thorough, Harry thought.

"Thank you, sir. I didn't use a spell to locate you, professor. I can see certain types of magical signatures. Your obfuscation spell looked like an orange cloud to me, and since it was sitting in a chair I presumed it was a person. I honestly didn't know it was you."

Flitwick's eyebrows rose again, higher this time.

"That's remarkable, Mister Potter. Magical signatures..." - his brow furrowed as he looked back at Harry - "...orange, you say?"

Harry was rather shocked to have been so readily believed.

"Yes, sir. And opaque."

"Really? That's fascinating, Mister Potter!" Flitwick exclaimed with obvious excitement, demonstrating a thirst for knowledge appropriate for head of House Ravenclaw. "There are some potions that grant such an ability for a short time, and it's possible to enchant an object to see through obscuring spells..." Clearly Harry's statement had intrigued him.

Harry cleared his throat. "Perhaps we could discuss this more tomorrow, Professor?"

"Hm...oh...oh, yes. Yes! Quite right, Mister Potter, quite right. It's a bit late today and you need to settle in. Come to my office tomorrow before dinner, alright?"

Harry smiled at his excitable Head of House. "Yes sir, that would be great. Thank you. Oh, and neat silencing spell, by the way."

Flitwick just winked back at him. He was going to like teaching this one. He waved the spell down and shuffled off to have a word with the Prefects on his way out.

"Anthony, Penelope - I'd like you to keep an eye on the first years, please. Make sure they get to their classes on time for a day or two. Distribute the castle maps we made last year, and familiarize them with house elf protocols. Oh, and keep an eye on Mister Potter, if you would. He's going to be Interesting."

The prefects knew that when the professor used audible capitals in his instructions, it meant something significant was up. Flitwick departed, but not without a final glance at Harry Potter.

It was well after ten, and Harry Potter was wide awake. All the magic flowing around him was affecting him like caffeine. Maybe standing in

pools of magic for the last five hours had something to do with it, Harry supposed.

"Harry."

He turned to find Hermione there, looking a bit tired but very pleased with her new digs.

"Ready to chat?" he asked.

"Yes, but...where?"

Harry pointed straight up. Hermione glanced up to the stories and stories of bookcases and walkways ringing the tower.

"All the way up there?"

"Sure...unless you're not sufficiently curious?"

"Prat. Lead the way."

They ended up on the fifth floor balcony, which was only about two meters wide. At the midpoint opposite the stairway two chairs and desk had been installed underneath a large display of maps. This was an unlikely place for anyone to be on the first day of classes.

They sat down opposite one another, Harry leaning in and Hermione copying him. In a quiet voice, Harry said "Hermione, I promised you I'd explain what you saw on the train, and I will. But first, I have a question."

She locked eyes with him, her pupils large. "Yes, Harry?"

Harry had decided to just come out and ask. His serious tone of voice told her he was worried about something.

"Hermione, can you keep a secret?"

She tilted her head at him, wondering where this was going.

CH10: A Chat and a Plan

In a quiet voice, Harry said "Hermione, I promised you I'd explain what you saw on the train, and I will. But first, I have a question."

She locked eyes with him, her pupils large. "Yes, Harry?"

Harry had decided to just come out and ask. His serious tone of voice told her he was concerned about something.

"Hermione, can you keep a secret?"

She tilted her head at him, wondering where this was going.

"I assume this is something fairly major?"

"To me it is, yeah."

Hermione paused for a moment to chew on her thumbnail; a nervous habit, Harry assumed, when she thought about something serious. All her nails were cropped close, Harry noticed.

"Well...", she began, choosing her words carefully, "...it depends, Harry. If a good friend of mine asked me to keep an important secret, I would do my best, up to the point where someone's life might be in danger. If it was life or death, I'd probably choose to have my friend alive and angry with me, rather than having them dead." Hermione watched him carefully for a response. Harry dropped his chin on to his steepled fingertips while he thought about that.

After a long beat, he said "I guess I could live with that. So to speak." Hermione nodded. "I have some things I'd like to share with you, that I'd rather no one else knew."

"...Alright."

After a breath, Harry continued: "Unfortunately, there are ways and means to pull our thoughts right out of our heads." As he said this, Harry laid a slim booklet on the table between them, titled *Occlumency: The Art of Keeping One's Thoughts to Oneself*.

Hermione's eyes went wide as she processed the implications of that. "You mean they can just...magic the thoughts right out of your head?"



"Basically, yep."

"But that's!..that's...that's... just so completely wrong, Harry!"

Harry nodded. With a sigh he continued: "Apparently, it's called Legilimency. At least two of the staff here practice it."

Hermione gaped at him, shock written across her face. "How do you know that?"

In a low tone, Harry replied: "The twins told me. Apparently they discovered it the hard way, after being caught while pranking a Slytherin prefect last year. According to them, Professor Snape yanked the information right out of their heads when they refused to talk."

"That's just massively wrong, Harry... that's a complete invasion of privacy. Actually, that's practically assault!"

"I agree. Which is why this...", he tapped the booklet, "...is a logical necessity. The twins told me that they've nearly got it down after six or seven months. We need to do better."

She picked up the well-used booklet and skimmed the twenty or so pages. "You got this from the twins, then?"

"Yes, and I briefly asked Terry about it as well. It lets you build a barrier around your mind, to prevent magical mind-reading. It requires effort and skill to use effectively. Side benefits include faster recall and resistance to truth serums. Apparently, some magical families teach their children from childhood. Michael learned it that way."

"Really?" she said, sounding rather more interested.

"Mmmm. And I saw a barrier around Snape at the banquet tonight. He's obviously an Occlumens as well as a Legilimens. You have to assume that if he is, then Dumbledore certainly is."

She paused for beat, then said "Wait, you saw a barrier around Snape...?"

Harry clenched his lips and eyes rather forcefully in having slipped up.

Hermione watched him sit there with his eyes squeezed shut. Harry, meanwhile, was thinking in a rather panicked fashion about how much he should say to her, how much he could say given that whatever she knew was fair game to anyone capable of reading their minds. Eventually he sighed, his face relaxed, and he opened one eye, to see her staring back at him. He opened the other eye.

"You 'saw' magic around Professor Snape, Harry?"

"Yes."

"How does that work, exactly?"

"Well...I'm going to give you generalities here, as whatever you know is fair game to a legilimens at the moment. But everything I will say, is the truth. Agreed?" She looked rather unhappy about it, but couldn't refute his logic. After a pause, she nodded.

"I seem to have the ability to see certain magical signatures. That's how I spotted Flitwick in the corner earlier."

She goggled at him. "Harry, that's...really cool!"

He grinned at her. "I know, right? Apparently, according to Flitwick, there are potions that give you a similar ability temporarily, and some enchanted items that allow the user to see magical signatures. So it's not unheard-of."

"Huh...So what is it you see, exactly?"

Harry knew that was more that he could share, at the moment. "Different things. Colors, mostly. I'd rather not say more until both of us can keep our thoughts private, Hermione."

She huffed at him, or rather at the situation, really. She eyed the booklet again. "So we really need to know this, I guess."

"It will improve your studying, Hermione; look at it that way."

"Hmph. We'll see."

"I really appreciate you-"

Harry cut off in mid-sentence, distracted, as both of their heads turned out to the open center of the tower to see the head of prefect Penelope Clearwater slowing rising into view, about four meters past the edge of the narrow balcony. 'You don't see that every day', Harry thought to himself.

"Hello! You two Ravens have found yourselves quite the little perch up here!"

"Hello, Penelope," Hermione answered. "How are you doing that, exactly?"

Clearwater grinned. "It's Penny, please. Anthony is hovering me; it's the fastest way to check the whole library for students before curfew."

Harry leaned over a bit to see Anthony five stories down with his wand aloft and a faint orange tether up to Penny. He looked to Penny and asked "Time to go?"

Penny said "Yes, it's nearly eleven and you've had a long day, I'm sure. There will be plenty of time to study, believe me!"

"Alright, we were at a stopping point, anyway," Harry said, passing the booklet face-down to Hermione. She tucked it into her sleeve. The two rose, replaced their chairs, and made their way around to the spiraling stairwell. As they walked, Penny called down to them "We're leading the first years down to breakfast at half-seven tomorrow. See you then!"

Harry and Hermione wound their way down to the separate doors of the first year boys' and girl's dormitories. They stopped for a moment and shared a look.

"See you Tomorrow?" he asked.

"See you then. I'll have a look at the booklet in the meantime."

"You'll read it twice, you mean..." Harry teased.

She blushed, but acknowledged, "Possibly."

Harry half-smiled at her. She half-smiled back. Both turned towards their doors. Her voice stopped him.

"Harry?"

He turned back to look at her.

"...Thanks."

" You, too."

Harry turned to the door, noticing the light-blue spellwork around the handle and hinges. Security spells, maybe? He pushed the door open and walked into a tornado. Pillows were flying everywhere, loose feathers were soaring around randomly, and not one, not two, but three quaffles were being tossed around by the three boys in the dorm. Apparently Harry wasn't the only one wound up by the ambient magic in the castle. Harry pushed the door closed behind him, facing the maelstrom.

"Hey! Potter's here! Catch!"

And with that, a quaffle came speeding from his right. Harry 'saw' it well in advance of it's actual flight time thanks to the bright purple spellwork surrounding it. Harry raised his right hand and caught it dead. Another purple comet came from his left, so Harry did the obvious thing and caught it in his left hand. Of course, the third quaffle came down the middle, and Harry on instinct caught it between the other two in his hands. At least they looked like quaffles, if his recollection of the window at Quality Quidditch Supplies was accurate.

The room went silent.

"Whoah!"

"That was so cool!"

"Blimey!"

And that was how Harry Potter was introduced to his dorm mates on the second best day of his life. Harry grinned.

"Way to go, Harry!"

"Thanks," he said, and flipped the middle quaffles back to Rich Clarkson. He tossed one to Jeremy Hammond, and set the third on Steve Wright's bed. The three had obviously been having the mother of all pillow fights. Random feathers were still drifting slowly to the ground.

"Do you play?" Steve asked.

"Er, no... I mean, not yet. Didn't have a chance to at home."

Clarkson offered, "That's too bad, mate. With hands like that you're a natural for chaser."

"What are you on about? Look at him! He's barely bigger than a broom himself! He's a perfect seeker if ever there was one!" countered Hammond.

"You're both wrong. He's a natural-born keeper, he is!" said Wright.

Harry said, "Er... I haven't had much call to play anything, really. Looking forward to trying it out, though." And that's all it took to get his three room-mates into a lengthy discussion of tactics, broomsticks, teams and equipment.

The room itself was round, of course, with four poster beds and side tables. The entrance and a bathroom door bracketed a small fireplace on the inside wall. Various hangings decorated the stone walls, mostly for warmth. None were enchanted, as far as Harry could tell.

Miraculously, his bed was mostly free of debris; only a few random feathers and a sock had made it through the open hangings. Harry was relieved to sense no magic on the bed itself; just a big, deep mattress nicer than any he'd ever seen. His trunk sat at the foot of his bed, and he set about unpacking his newly bought clothes and supplies. He packed as many books as he could fit into shelf of the small table beside his bed, which held a reading lamp.

The other three boys had calmed down a bit. Clarkson was now lying on his bed flipping a quaffle in the air. His magical signature sort of resembled the interlocked antlers of a moose, Harry thought. Hammond's looked exactly like a giant squirrel with no tail. Given their respective statures, it seemed rather appropriate to nickname them 'Moose and Squirrel.' Harry chuckled to himself over that one; he loved that cartoon. Steven...Steven was another story altogether. His aura morphed constantly between something that resembled various sculptured topiary and a large golden penguin. Steven produced a wand and repaired the pillows, which Harry thought was pretty neat; all the loose feathers zoomed back into the pillows around the room on little tethers of gold energy.

"Well done, mate," Hammond commented on his way to the loo.

They chatted for another twenty minutes or so, during which Harry learned that Clarkson wanted to be a writer, Hammond a broom engineer, and Wright was as yet undecided. After his turn in the loo, Harry set out his chosen book, his wand and his clothes for tomorrow. He climbed into the softest bed he'd ever experienced, drew the hangings to keep the cold out, and read for some time by the dim light of the fire.

Try as he might, something was bugging him and he couldn't sleep until he found out. Cautiously, Harry sat up and peeked at his roommates. It was after one, and they were all fast asleep. Gentle snores and the hiss of the fire were audible to Harry over the deep hum of the castle's magic. Harry glanced over his shoulder to the tapestry hanging there. It ended a half-meter from the bed, and hung nearly all the way to the floor. He silently slid out of bed until his bare feet hit the cool stones. The castle's hum tickled his feet a bit, but that was all; he had acclimated fairly quickly to the magic-rich environment, aside from the energetic glare giving him eyestrain. Harry carefully pinched the heavy fabric of the tapestry and pulled it aside to bunch against his headboard. This uncovered a wall of meter-thick hand hewn blocks making up the exterior wall of Ravenclaw tower. Each stone glowed with a soft golden light in Harry's eyes, slightly brighter at the center of each block, with a crisp gold and crimson ribbon running through the mortar line.

He took a steadying breath, then placed his hand up to the center of one of the blocks, and Pulled.

The sound hit him, first. The gentle bass hum had become a church organ blaring in his head. The sensation was next, like putting his hand under a firehose of uncomfortably hot water - pressure, force, too much, rocketing up his arm - painful! He yanked his hand off the wall and shoved the magic down into the floor. A scorched handprint remained behind, drained of light. His palm stung painfully. Harry shook it out, twisted his lip to the side, and considered: 'Frequency... amplitude...flow rate versus surface area...harmonics...' Over the course of a minute, the block's uniform glow returned. Harry took a long, slow breath and once again placed his hand on the wall.

Slowly, Harry tried a very subtle Pull, the lightest he could manage. So far so good. For a moment nothing happened, then the bass-hum grew louder in his head, present but not unbearable. The sensation was similar to pulling warm laundry from the dryer at Privet Drive - soft, very warm, and a bit clingy. Within a few seconds, the golden light from the stone had begun to flow into Harry's palm. The bones of his hands hummed; his flesh was translucent, immersed in light. After a moment, Harry withdrew his hand from the stone once more, leaving behind a larger drained spot on the wall. He stared in wonder at his golden hand, glowing with an angstrom of Hogwarts' power.

Harry made a loose fist and raised his glowing hand to a position in front of his chest, and then wrapped the fingers of his other hand around it. Chanting to himself 'please let this work, please let it work, please, please, please...', Harry asked the golden magic to move into his other hand. The golden glow began to move slowly, like thick honey, flowing into Harry's left hand. When the glow was about even, Harry opened his hands. Now divided, the glow was less pronounced but still radiant to Harry's senses. He was holding the magic within him. That thought loosened a knot of fear and doubt in Harry's mind - he could move magic like he moved energy - it was possible.

It still felt like Hogwarts' magic though, humming faintly in his hands. It sounded like Hogwarts to him, if he moved a hand to his ear. Harry was fairly sure he could put it back into the wall with a touch, and it would simply melt back into the building. So he could grab other magic, and he could hold it. But could he use it, Harry wondered. Harry asked the golden magic to spiral out into his palm in the way he did with his own blue motes. The gold magic didn't move at all, just hummed to him, waiting.

Harry tried his last idea. He pushed a bit of his own blue magic slowly down his arms to his hands, watching very carefully with all his sensitivity as he did.

The cloud of blue motes touched the honey-thick golden magic somewhere below his wrists. As blue met gold and soaked through it, the golden magic began to separate into thick yarn-like strands. Harry watched the golden strands come apart, unwind and dissolve into fine threads of golden loops and segments. These quickly broke apart into a swarm of golden particles intermixed with his own blue ones. Harry asked for a spiral of motes over his left palm, and one formed almost immediately, blue and gold together, with little effort.

In fact, Harry realized, that was considerably easier than it had been with just his blue magic alone. The little sphere of particles in his hand was about the most important thing in the world to Harry, right then. He could use magic from other sources, if he broke it down first and blended it with his own. Harry held his ear close to the spiral - so close some of the flecks orbited right through his ear - and listened. No humming. The magic was his, now. Harry closed his eyes for a long moment, thinking the words 'Thank you, thank you, thank you...'

Harry replaced the tapestry and sat down on his bed, feet swinging over the side, and stared at his little grains of power. The gold flecks were already shifting to his typical shade of blue-turquoise. So he could borrow magic, Harry thought, and make it his own. But why did he have to deconstruct it first, he wondered? Why did it behave differently than energy? What made it coherent and persistent?

No more answers were forthcoming tonight, Harry decided. It was late, and he needed some rest. Harry Potter let Hogwarts hum him to sleep.

Note this a compelation of chapters 1 through 10. See the subsequent chapters here on FF.



## CH11: Interludes and First Class

### Hermione Reflects.

Hermione turned towards her door, thinking about the boy at her back, the book in her sleeve, the girls in the room beyond, and what a remarkably incredible day it had been. Some part of her brain that kept track of such things put it at her second best day ever, behind her first trip to Diagon Alley.

She heard the door across the turret close, and finally - for the first time today, it seemed- she was alone. She paused before her door, let her head drop, and took three long breaths. This was a chance to start over, where nobody knew her enough to judge her, and she was going to make the most of it. She'd even ended up in the bookish House, which is where she wanted to be, and hopefully she'd find a few similar friends here, finally. Unconsciously, she lifted a hand to her mouth and began to nibble on a close-cropped fingernail.

Without being told to, her brain drew up a very short list of her actual friends, with the last name still fresh: Harry. His name sparked a cluster of thought, memory and conjecture, like eight televisions playing different channels at once: The frost on Draco's shoes; the booklet in her sleeve; secrets; visual perception of magical signatures -how?; the image of the anxious, pained boy on the bench across from her; Snape as mind-thief; the twin's frozen hands; Harry winking at her; and most potently, the sense-memory of that amazing white light Harry made, the song in her head, so pure and beautiful it had caught her whole being... just the memory of it quieted the ribbons of thought spiraling in her mind.

A muted voice filtered through the door; Padma, by the timbre of it. Her voice triggered a thought-cluster on everything she knew or conjectured about the Indian girl: eleven; Sister to Parvati in Gryffindor; born Maharashtra, India; two parents; named after the Sanskrit word for 'lotus', meaning divinity or purity; warm smile; excellent diction; cultured; social skills; probably rich to very rich, being able attend Hogwarts from India; interested in Terry Boot. They had talked a bit over dessert; Hermione had felt a bit middle-class compared to someone who was indirectly related to Indian royalty.

All three girls inside were laughing now, and the sound made something ache in her chest. She desperately wanted to be a part of that, doing something normal, being part of a group of smart girls. Padma, Lisa, Kelly Bloom and she had nibbled some excellent brownies at dessert (dark chocolate; slightly crispy tops; still warm; inside moist; real sugar; mandatory flossing night; roughly 240 calories per 2 inch square, her brain supplied). Their conversation was varied, centered mostly on classes, teachers and the castle. A few of the older Ravenclaw girls had given them the benefit of their experience (avoid Peeves, Filch, and the lav on second floor south - haunted) and told them of the girls vs. boys contest right away so as to maximize incentives to excel. It was the most socializing in her peer group she'd done in a year, at least.

Hermione reviewed what she knew of the other two girls. Lisa was blonde and athletic; Scots; muggleborn like her; plays field hockey; interested in wizarding medicine. Kelly Bloom was tall and shy; vegetarian; father ran an apothecary in a magical village on the Isle of Man; horse pendant on silver chain.

Right. She could make this work. She certainly would not be ostracized for being too intelligent in a House founded on the pursuit of knowledge. It was up to her to make the connections with these girls, alliances at least, if not friends.

Hermione's eyes clicked open. She drew herself up with a final deep breath and slowly opened the door. A magical teddy bear was dancing in the middle of the room. She grinned, and it began from there.

Book bag in hand, Harry Potter followed his dorm mates down to the Ravenclaw common room at 7:22. He'd been up for a good hour already, talking to Hammond and generally loitering about while the other two got ready. Apparently, Jeremy's father worked for a manufacturer of racing brooms, and he'd inherited the bug. Clarkson led the line, with Steven lagging behind as he'd forgotten his tie.

"Hey Hamster, go grab Stevie, we're about to leave," Richard said. Jeremy clambered up the stairs once again, two at a jot, into their dorm. Steven was just pulling the tie over his head and fixing his collar when Hammond burst in.

"C'mon, the bus is leaving!"

"Alright, alright. Hey, what do you suppose caused that?" he asked, nodding towards Harry's bed, which had been made some hours ago.

Hammond looked once, saw nothing unusual, and looked again. There was a black scorch mark right next to Potter's bed, with the outlines of two small feet blackest in the middle. Hammond scratched his head. Harry was obviously fine, downstairs and waiting for them.

"Dunno. Come ON, we're late!" He grabbed Steven by his newly donned tie and drug him out the door.

Downstairs, Harry greeted Hermione and the other girls by name as they entered. Kelly gave him a bit of the celebrity stare. Padma returned his salutation with a warm "Good Morning, Harry."

Lisa just nodded at him with a half-grin, saying "Potter."

Hermione drifted over to him with a little smile and simply said, "Morning."

"Sleep well?" he asked.

"Oh definitely. The beds are extremely comfortable. And you?"

"Never better," he answered with a grin. "So, how'd it go?" he asked, inclining his head in the direction of the dorms.

"Not bad. We're getting to know one another. Fortunately we all have some common personality traits. So far, so good. And you?"

"Entertaining," Harry said, as they watched Hammond lead Steven into the room by his tie, to chuckles from the assembled group.

Breakfast was fairly routine, with the exception of witnessing their first owl post delivery, and having their schedules delivered by Master Flitwick. All of the first year 'claws had Transfiguration first today, with Hufflepuff. Next was Introduction to Ancient Runes, then a break, then Introduction to Arithmancy and lunch. Another break preceded double Potions, also with Hufflepuff, followed by free time until dinner. Tomorrow was double Herbology with Slytherin, then

Charms, Defense the Dark Arts, and Care of Magical Creatures. The schedule on alternating days, with Astronomy added once a week on Wednesday nights. Harry was very curious about both Arithmancy and Runes. He knew some runes could store energy for decades or even centuries.

The five-minute bell rang and they set off to the transfiguration classroom. Being Ravenclaws, and having maps, they all made it with time to spare. Three of the 'Puffs had mishaps, apparently. They all shuffled into the empty classroom, vacant but for a medium sized, muscular cat laying next to the teacher's desk. It had rather heavy orange-tan fur, tufted ears, and black spots through its coat. A short tail flicked behind it. Faint traces of black lines graced its large, flat face. It lazed on the floor in a sunbeam while the students filed in and took their seats.

Harry was impressed. To him, the cat was clearly no ordinary cat. Rather, he saw a ghostly human silhouette of pale yellow energy hover around the cat, in roughly the same posture. Although the color positions were reversed, that magical signature was familiar, and the same three clear notes he'd heard last night upon seeing McGonnagall played through his mind right now. Harry was pretty certain he could recognize her blindfolded.

Eventually the final 'Puff arrived and the cat sat up, drawing a few admiring comments from the students regarding its coloring. It scanned the class slowly, and when it got to Harry, he mouthed "Hello, Professor." It winked at him and finished its survey of the room.

The cat took one springing step forward and promptly became Professor McGonnagall. The class made all the right noises of appreciation. Harry found the transformation was interesting as the silver, pale yellow and orange inverted themselves in an implosion-explosion of light.

"Welcome to your first class at Hogwarts, students."

She went on to warn them that Transfiguration was some of the most complex and dangerous magic they would learn while at Hogwarts, and they had to start in first year to obtain any skill with the discipline. Anyone fooling around in her class would be barred, permanently. To a Ravenclaw, that was a serious threat.

McGonnagall outlined the various kinds of Transfiguration in broad terms: non-organic to non-organic, non-organic to organic, organic to non-organic, and finally organic to organic. Each of these required specialized levels of understanding of the complexity of the thing undergoing Transfiguration.

"Observe," she said, and waved a complicated wand motion at the table. Harry observed an orange plume of magic grow around her wand and leap to the empty table two meters away. The spell surrounded the table, which shuddered briefly and shrunk to become a pig. The class made appreciative noises again. Harry stared at the not-pig; he was certain it was not alive. It had no radiance, no internal light. Rather, it resembled a puppet of a pig, with a thin layer of magic around its circumference guiding the inert matter within, like a living glove on a wooden hand. It felt Wrong to Harry, a synthetic imitation of life; which it was, he supposed. The magic had...intention to it, purpose, a goal. That had to come from the caster, Harry reasoned. So her spell was telling the table to be a pig, and would continue to do so until canceled, or until the magic dissipated.

McGonnagall canceled the transfiguration and resumed her lecture. She explained the absolute prohibitions against transfiguring anything that might be inhaled or imbibed, with the crucial point being that transfigurations were absolutely, always temporary. Having a pork chop revert to oak and nails in one's intestines would be unpleasant and possibly fatal.

They listened and they wrote. Harry's fountain pen got curious looks from a few of the purebloods, and approving glances from several of the Ravenclaws.

Eventually McGonnagall informed them that they were to try a simple Transfiguration, matchsticks to needles. She incanted a spell which floated a trio of matches to each of their desks.

"Alright class, wands out. The incantation is 'Facere Acus.' The wand motion is as follows," and she made a short swirl with her wand, then poked it forward sharply to finish. "The wand motion is diagrammed on the board. Visualize the entire process, not just the result. Observe." McGonnagall did the spell and three matches on the nearest desk shrunk into perfect little sewing needles. She

canceled the spell and asked for questions. As there were none, she said "You may begin." Nearly everyone began wand-waving and incanting with the enthusiasm only children can muster; everyone, that is, except Harry.

Harry drew the spruce-and-phoenix wand from the holster at his belt. The wand sang its two clear, perfect notes distantly in the back of his mind. He rehearsed the motion once, twice, thrice. The latin was simple enough. He repeated McGonnagall's pronunciation in his mind, and pre-visualized his blue magic surrounding the match and changing it into a gleaming silver needle. Fixing that process firmly in mind, Harry Potter Harry willed a small breath of magic into the wand, attenuated through much practice. The wand's song grew clear in his mind. Then, Harry Potter cast his first official spell. To his senses, a blue beam reached out and touched the match, enveloping it in a faint blue nimbus. Harry asked it to become a needle, and...nothing. Not a twitch, not a gleam, nothing. So much for expectations. Harry sighed.

He tried again, saying the words, waving the wand, thinking 'be a needle.' Again, slightly more power, thinking 'be a pointy metal cylinder'. And again. 'Be a needle, dammit!'. Nothing.

'What am I not doing, that I need to be doing?'

He twisted around and watched Padma's wand movement; his looked the same. Her perfect pronunciation was more elegant, but his was clear and adequate. So how come her matches were shrinking and resembling metal with each attempt she made?

Harry's lip pulled sideways with a frown. 'Alright Potter, think'.

This was a hunk of wood and potassium chlorate, with a little sulfur mixed in. Nothing tricky, here.

'Visualize the entire process,' McGonnagall had said. 'But WHAT process, exactly?'

He made another attempt. The match tapered a little, but refused to shrink, or narrow, or become metallic. Annoyed, Harry flicked his hand and pushed a little sphere of superheated air at the first match, making it ignite. 'Stupid match'. Hermione's eyes cut over to him

when she saw the fire. Harry palmed it and yanked all the heat energy out of it, leaving it and the desk under his palm frosted over.

Harry closed his eyes and thought, some more. 'Figure it out, Potter. Think!' he chastised himself. 'This is the simplest bloody thing in the book!'

Harry sighed, and thought. He wanted to transfigure the match. McGonnagall had transfigured the desk into something resembling a pig.

'But', he thought, 'it wasn't REALLY a pig...it was a table pretending to be a pig'. Harry's brain clicked. 'No... it was the magic pretending to be a pig, and using the table as raw material.' Which actually made sense, because one could presumably transfigure an ottoman into a pig just as easily as a table. It had to be the caster's will and magic that warped the material-at-hand into whatever the spell defined. And you weren't actually making a pig - you were just asking the magic to impersonate one, using whatever you tossed in as raw material. Was that it? Hmmmm.'

With that understanding in mind, Harry asked his magic to grab the match and pretend to be a needle. He spelled the match again, and got a long, silvery stick with a point at one end - a substantial improvement. He half-grinned at the stick -was it really that easy? - and tweaked his visualization of the needle a bit. 'Pretend to be just like this,' he thought to the magic in his wand, and visualized the needle spinning in his head, down to the smallest detail; the eye at the end; the coarse iron grains of the metal; the taper of the point. He cast the spell, and was rewarded with one very good needle. He grinned. 'So that's how it works...intention, visualization, a clear picture of what you want.' The needle had a fine blue nimbus around it in Harry's vision, his own donated magic keeping the transformation alive.

McGonnagall's voice came from somewhere over his shoulder. "Well done, Miss Turpin; first successful transfiguration. Five points to Ravenclaw." Harry glanced over to see Hermione grimace. She had three pointy, silver matches in front of her. She looked over at him with one eyebrow raised. He held up his needle, which earned him a slightly grumpy "hmph."

He leaned toward her, and whispered "Don't ask it to change. Ask it to PRETEND to change." Hermione looked at him as if he'd spoken Mandarin.

A moment later McGonnagall stepped over to his desk, examined the burnt remains of the first match, and then the well-made needle beside it.

"Very good, Mister Potter. Take two points for Ravenclaw." McGonnagall tapped Harry's needle with her wand and canceled the transfiguration. "Continue practicing, please."

Harry did so, transfiguring the first match again: first the flow, then the visualization, then the casting. 'Pretend to be a needle precisely like this' Harry thought. And it did. In fact, It seemed to change more easily the second time. 'It's getting used to being told what to do,' Harry surmised. He tried it again without the incantation, and got the same result. Once the magic knew what he wanted, it seemed eager to do its work and bend things on command. 'Interesting.'

Harry grasped the needle between his fingers and studied it. The magic wrapped the inert material of the match, compressing it into a needle, containing it in a smaller space than it normally occupied. 'Magic as container,' Harry thought. Curious, Harry Pulled his magic back off of the object. The thought-image of 'needle' echoed faintly in his senses as the match reappeared with a pop. Harry presumed that was the echo of his prior will, entwined with the reclaimed magic. 'I suppose that makes sense, really - since the magic carries the intent along with it.' He drained his magic from the other spelled needle and started over. He tried them both at once, which required a bit more power, but yielded success. 'Would something of similar size be possible?' he wondered, So he tried for a thimble, and got one right away.

"Well done, Harry; you're a natural!" Padma said from the seat behind. He looked at her over his shoulder and mouthed the word 'thanks'. A breath later Hermione vocalized a little cry of 'yes!', which caused him to glance her way and observe a shining needle in her grasp. He congratulated her, earning him a grin.

'Was that all there was to it, then?' Harry wondered. 'Tell the magic what you wanted -as specifically as possible, details mattered - then feed some power into it, and chuck it at something? Really?'



McGonnagall glided by, observed his thimble and needles, and gave an approving nod. "Nice embellishment, Mister Potter." She moved to cancel the spellwork, but Harry covered them with a hand to save her the trouble.

"That's okay, professor; I can cancel the spells."

Her eyebrow rose. "...Very well, please do."

Harry's fingertip touched both objects in turn and reclaimed his magic, leaving two matches on the desk. He glanced at the professor. McGonnagall... actually smiled at him. Halfway, but it was still a smile. She picked up the matches from his desk, and said quietly, "You may read ahead if you wish."

Harry nodded back, rather pleased with himself for figuring out a method that worked for him. But why wasn't it just explained that way in the first place, he wondered. Hammond's voice echoed from the back - "Excellent!" - followed by noises of approval from the others. And so it went, until the bell. They were given a reading assignment and assigned an essay on the different types of Transfiguration.

Harry tromped down the hall towards the stairs to Ancient Runes, still marveling at the site of all his classmates walking casually though hallways flooded with magic.

If you liked it, please review... If you hate it, do better.

## CH12: Remainder of Day One

Harry Potter was having a pretty good first day of classes, so far. Granted he'd completed exactly one class thus far, but he believed his academic career was going just fine. He ambled along with his fellow first-year Ravenclaws and fell into step with Hammond and Clarkson, who were discussing the merits of various brooms for professional Seekers.

"More power is better, unquestionably!" argued Clarkson.

"Maneuverability wins matches," countered Hammond. Clarkson waved that off and the friendly argument continued as they trekked upstairs to the Runes classroom. The stairways saw fit to divert them only once. Harry was rather intrigued by the semi-sentient paintings; in his perceptions the actual paint was inert, covered and animated by a layer of pinkish magic that ebbed and flowed across the surface of the paint. The frames seemed to be the anchor points and magical reservoirs for each painting, based on the strength of the glow there.

As they turned a corner, Harry was surprised to see a crooked old man in a shabby coat pushing a broom, attended by a mangy grey cat. Neither had any magical signature as far as Harry could tell, although both had the faint radiance of living beings. Filch paused to watch them walk by with a faint glare, which stopped all their conversation dead. Harry and Hammond shared a glance and a roll of the eyes.

They located classroom 6B and filed in. Harry was rather curious about runes given what little he'd read about them. Apparently runes could be made to absorb and store magic, usually spells, and release them later upon a trigger or command. He hadn't yet seen any in use at Hogwarts, and wondered why.

A Professor Harry had not seen before was standing by chalkboard, on which were some glyphs were sketched.

Presumably this was Bathsheba Babbling, according to the schedule. She was slightly younger than McGonagall, Harry supposed; tall and very slender with short red hair, green eyes and a pale complexion. Her voice was authoritative as she said "Alright everyone, take a

seat, and open to page four of "Ancient Runes Made Easy". A faint Irish brogue colored her speech.

Harry set out his text, a Moleskine notebook and fountain pen. Ernie Macmillan leaned over from the next desk to have a look at it. Harry studied Ernie while Ernie studied the pen. His posture, manners and poise all spoke to a cultured childhood. The ring on his finger spoke of wealthy magical parentage. Added together, that most likely equalled pureblood. His magical signature was interesting, like dozens of tiny armor plates of scarlet light that bent as he moved.

"Pardon, but how do you write with that?" he asked in a proper Scots burr.

"It's got a nib just like a quill, but metal. Gives you consistent, even lines, and no spills."

"That's clever -very Ravenclaw of you, Harry."

"It's muggle, actually. They invented them over a hundred years ago. Very practical."

"Really?" Ernie asked, intrigued. How come he hadn't heard of that?

"Mmm."

Professor Babbling stepped around to the front of her desk to address them, ending that conversation for now.

"Good morning, class. Welcome to Introduction to Ancient Runes. My name is Bathsheba Babbling, and I will be your instructor. As you may know, we are trying this introductory class format this year for both Runes and Arithmancy," she said, gesturing to the board behind her, "in order to expose students to a wider range of magical ideas and topics. You may choose to drop the subject after your first year if your aptitudes lie elsewhere. You may do three years for a minor concentration in Runic Magics, or complete five years of material over your stay at Hogwarts for a full certification in Runic Magics, enabling you to take the journeyman or apprentice exams in your seventh year." A few of the Ravenclaws perked up at this; rune masters were generally very well paid and sought after by security firms.

Babbling waved at the board again. "Runes are nothing more and nothing less than magic stored in written form. They can heal; they can kill; they can create or destroy; they can produce light and heat. They can guard objects and places. And, they accomplish all of this without taking any magic from the user."

Several of the Ravenclaws were quite impressed with that speech. She'd clearly rehearsed it, Harry thought, and it had worked; his interest was piqued.

Harry studied the energy signature of the woman while Babbling called the roll. She had a rather attractive spiral of little white starlets slowly rotating around her which twinkled when she spoke, or, Harry observed, thought. It resembled saturn's rings spiraling around her, which Harry rather liked. The blink frequency of the lights seemed to grow faster when she said his name.

"Harry Potter?" She met his eyes.

"Present, ma'am."

"James Prenderman?"

Eventually the roll was complete and class began in earnest. Runes were explained as being symbols of pre-latin alphabets, mostly Norse and Germanic, which were later adopted for other magical purposes. The professor asked for any initial questions or topics they wished to cover. Hammond inquired about the runes used to make brooms fly, which got an enthusiastic response from most of the other boys in the room. Babbling compiled a list of topics on the board first, then set about answering many of them. Harry liked her straightforward approach.

They worked from the book for a half-dozen pages, and then Babbling had them stop while she handed out to each of them a small clay tile with bearing a single glyph. Harry studied his after she set it down on his desk. The tile was made of gently fired ceramic, soft as an over-baked cookie. The glyph was just three straight lines forming a simple star, two in a 'x' and a third dividing them. Harry could see a little glow of sky-blue magic in the core of the tile. Cautiously, Harry touched it with his fingertip. It felt to him like batteries always did at the Dursley's; a faint warmth and vibration came through, definitely not inert matter.

"Don't worry, class, they won't bite," Babbling said, pausing while many of them gingerly picked up their tile -Ernie had his an inch from his nose, staring intently at it - then she added "...much." Ernie's eyes went wide, so badly startled that he nearly dropped the tile. Harry liked her style.

"Can anyone guess what these runes do?"

Steven guessed 'light', as the rune could be taken to resemble a star.

"Good guess, but no. Anyone else?" Hermione guessed it was a slicing rune, and the marks were meant to divide or cut.

"Clever, but no. Anyone else have a theory?"

"Explosion?" Clarkson guessed.

"Er...no. Anyone?"

Meanwhile, Harry had been poking at the rune gently with magic to get it to talk to him. He held the tile flat between two fingers, and sent a little pulse of magic into it. A sparkle appeared above the rune in a cloud of sky-blue flecks.

'Ah.' Harry considered the will of the caster, or in this case the scribe, who instilled the magic into the shape. The rune must carry the intent as well as the magic, Harry reasoned. He put the tile down carefully, still holding it by two fingers, and hovered his other hand over it while he repeated the pulse. This time the little sky-blue flecks danced up into his palm, where he drew them in. A brief thought-image of glittering snowflakes slid through his mind, there one second and gone the next. Harry looked at the glyph once again; now it was obvious.

"It's a rune for cold", Harry said into the silence.

Babbling glanced at him, and her little stars spun faster.

"Very good, Mister Potter. Two points to Ravenclaw."

"Well done," Ernie breathed to him. Apparently Ernie had been stealthily watching him.

"Alright, everyone. Please take your tiles in both hands like so," she demonstrated, "and holding it AWAY from your face, crack the tile in two. This will activate the rune."

Numerous little cracks were heard around the room, followed by ooohs and aahhhs as little suspended clouds of sparkling snowflakes drifted down from above the tiles to the children's desks below. The shower was beautiful, lasting just a few seconds. Harry saw the spell glow bright blue for a moment, then expand to a diffuse cloud the size of an orange, and then... implode?...and vanish. Interesting.

"Now class, can anyone tell me what the magic in the rune did?"

A hand went up. "It conjured snow." Clarkson said.

"Close, but not exactly. Anyone else?"

"Artificial snow?" Padma guessed.

"Good guess, but no."

"It summoned snow from somewhere really cold," Steven ventured.

"Creative, but no...anyone?" The professor's eyes roamed to Ernie, then stopped on Harry. He lifted his arm at the elbow, hand up.

"Mister Potter?"

"It froze the moisture in the air above the tile by pulling the heat out of it." Harry thought it ironic that he'd be the one to answer this question. Hermione turned a sharp look on him.

"...Correct, Harry. Another two points to Ravenclaw. And how did you determine that?"

Harry improvised. "I felt the cold first, then saw the snow. The snow was the affect, but the cold was the cause."

"Very good, Harry, that's correct. The spell does indeed create the cold first; the snow is the consequence. Now, I - question, Mister Potter?"

"Yes, ma'am. Where does the heat GO, exactly?"

She tilted her head up slightly to look at him appraisingly.

"Now that is a very perceptive question, Harry." She turned her eyes to the room.

"Can anyone tell me where the heat goes when the spell activates?"

Ernie raised a hand. "It gets vanished, I guess," he offered.

"Correct, Mister Macmillan. Take two points. Yes, Miss Turpin?"

"Thank you, ma'am. Vanished to where, exactly?"

Harry'd been wondering the same thing; their textbooks weren't really clear on that point. Babbling smiled, then, and she looked like a someone sharing a secret. She spread her hands and said, "To quote the Deputy Headmistress, that which is vanished goes 'into nonbeing, which is to say, everything.'"

Harry's head rocked back at the answer; 'that's very...zen,' he thought. 'But energy is always, always, always conserved,' he reasoned. 'The universe is a closed system. The energy had to go SOMEWHERE, even if you dispersed it evenly across the whole planet, it wouldn't be \*gone\* - just undetectable. So, what then - molecular disbursement? Energy-to-mass conversion? How is THAT possible?' Harry's brain was racing at the implications of sending energy off to 'nowhere'. If he could figure out a way to safely drain away energies that accumulated...hmmm.'

Harry had divided the pages in his notebook, filling the left page with the class notes and simultaneously filling the right page with his own ideas. It was a bit schizophrenic, but it worked for him. His hand moved back and forth between the pages regularly as he multi-tasked.

Babbling was lecturing now about the various kinds of Runes: the early Germanic origins of Elder Futhark runic alphabet, and its simplification over time into the Younger Futhark, which eventually yielded the Anglo-Saxon Futhorc alphabet somewhere around the fifth century. Harry jotted the salient points on one side of his page,

while postulating about thermodynamics on the other, seeing nothing at all odd about that. Ernie glanced at him once, then did a double-take at seeing Harry Potter taking to completely separate streams of notes at one time in that odd little book of his. How very Ravenclaw, indeed.

Both sides of Harry's brain nearly tripped over one another, though, when he glanced up at the large chart of Elder Futhark the professor was in the process of sticking to the wall. There, next to the roman letter S, and ascribed the meaning 'sun', was a diagonal lightning bolt, a perfect copy of his famous scar. 'Sun', Harry thought. 'In context, to an ancient man...the sun probably meant...light and heat. In other words...energy.'

Hermione caught his eye and made a slight zig-zag-zig' motion with her finger, indicating she'd spotted the symbol as well. Harry gave her a very subtle nod. Her eyebrows raised a twitch, which he interpreted to mean 'what do you think?'. He replied with an minimal shrug.

Kelly Bloom watched this whole exchange like a tennis match. Something was up with those two, already. She glanced back at Potter, who happened to glance her way. His unnervingly bright green eyes caught hers. She felt her face heat up, but held his glance and gave a small smile, which he returned. He really was a Ravenclaw, apparently, from the way he answered that question. He turned to ask Ernie something, and she considered the boy with the messy black hair. Snippets from all of the stories her mum had read her about the Boy Who Lived repeated in her memory: the brave toddler fighting the evil wizard; the orphan who saved them all. With an internal cringe she remembered the Harry Potter doll she'd loved when she was four, with the bright red scar on its oversized forehead. And now there he was, four desks away; short, well-dressed, confident, taking notes in an odd little notebook, answering questions, and having nonverbal conversations with Hermione Granger, of all people. Professor Babbling's voice cut through her reverie.

"As you can see, this class has a lot of ground to cover. In order to provide a overview for your more advanced work, the first year is mostly introductory theory and background to provide you with the understanding you'll need going forward. We will be learning to



identify the three main families of runes, but we will not be empowering runes with magic, yet."

Harry groaned to himself; that meant lots of translations and very little hands-on work. He really wanted to start understanding and USING runes to augment his magic and expand the possibilities of working with energy. Questions spun into the right page of his notebook about ways to vent or create or store energy.

She continued: "However, I will be offering some extra-credit opportunities for those so inclined, which will feature practical work with powered runes."

'Excellent', Harry thought. 'That's my ticket.'

Babbling wrapped up the class with a small homework assignment, and a standing invitation to visit her office should they need help.

As he began to pack up, Ernie asked, "Hey, Harry... would you mind if I tried that?"

He was pointing at Harry's fountain pen. Apparently it was an unknown to proper purebloods. Harry recognized a chance to start building a bridge.

"Sure. Just write normally," Harry said, handing the pen to Ernie.

Ernie accepted it gingerly, oriented it, and wrote out his name. The line was smooth and even, unlike a quill. Ernie wrote out 'Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry', and lifted the pen from the paper. He eyed the script, and then the pen, and then Harry.

"Muggle, you say?"

"Yep. Cost me about a five galleons."

"Huh. And it never runs dry?"

"Well, it carries its own ink inside it. You refill it from any inkwell, like this." Harry demonstrated the filling lever drawing ink into the pen.

"Wow...that's really clever."

"I agree. One should never dismiss good ideas just because they come from unconventional sources," Harry said meaningfully, and watched Ernie think about that for a second or three. Ernie nodded.

"You've got a point, there, Harry. I might have to find myself one of those."

Something about Ernie made Harry like him. Maybe it was the accent.

"I could help, if you like. I'm fairly certain it can all be done by post," Harry said.

"That would be brilliant, Harry, thanks." Ernie said with a grin.

"Shall I come by your table after dinner, then?"

"Right. I'll see you then," Ernie said, extending a hand. Harry shook it.

They each collected their things and made their way from the classroom to join their respective groups in the hall. At the stairwell, the 'Puffs went down, and the 'Claws went up. First years had an hour break next, then Arithmancy, then Lunch.

Harry chatted with Steven as the eight little Ravens returned to their common room. Steven was still advocating for the idea of a rune to summon snow from the North Pole. Harry grinned.

Harry decided he needed a walk outside during the break period. He dropped his book-bag quickly on his bed, grabbed a warm cloak, then reversed course back to the ground floor, through the west hall and out through the main doors.

As his feet left Hogwarts' steps, the deep bass humming in the back of his mind abruptly stopped. The gold light pooling around his feet stayed behind on the bottom step. As his feet touched the earth once more, he wobbled a bit, like stepping off a fast moving escalator back to solid ground. That would take a bit of getting used to, he supposed.

The weather was partly overcast at the moment, with intermittent sun touching the forest and a bit of the lake. That would do nicely.

As he strolled towards the lake, Harry realized he wasn't seeing any radiance from any of the living things around him - the trees, the birds, nothing. It was a bit disconcerting at first. The magical dampers on his eyesight were still ramped way up. Harry relaxed them slowly until he regained the vision of faint, translucent radiance covering the living things nearby.

'I hadn't realized how hyperactive the last few days had been,' he thought. 'All the new experiences, all the magic saturating the castle -that's what's making me hyper. No wonder it feels like I'm over-caffeinated. It's practically a circus in there!'

Eventually Harry found a tree by the lake with a good sized rock that seemed to be well-used for sitting and contemplating. So he did just that. The last few days had indeed been the most exciting of his young life. He'd seen more new things and met more new people - people like HIM, sort of - than he had in his entire life. It was a lot to take in. Out of habit, Harry began to review what he'd seen and learnt so far. The Ravenclaw boys in his year were all good chaps, though Steven could be a bit odd. The girls...hmmm. Padma was certainly the most poised and elegant. Kelly Bloom was interesting: perceptive, quiet, and pretty. Lisa was probably stronger than himself, Harry guessed.

Hermione...was Hermione. He trusted her as much as he trusted anyone at the moment. There was no betrayal in her radiant flux, no ulterior motive that he could perceive. He inferred from some of their similar mannerisms that she'd also been without many childhood friends. Perhaps that's part of why they clicked so well. Harry suspected their acquaintance would change as others entered their circle of friends; hopefully they would each find a few more genuine friends here.

Terry Boot was a bit guarded but generally helpful. The two Ravenclaw prefects Anthony and Penny seemed fair. The twins were just fun to be around, intelligent but undisciplined. As long as they didn't go overboard and bully anyone, Harry thought he'd rather like spending a bit more time around those two.

The adults were generally harder to read; they all had layers to their energies that masked their true intentions and motives -except for Hagrid, who was truly pure in his intentions, if not his judgement.

Flitwick-hmm, initial impressions were favorable. He'd know better what to expect from the man after their chat that afternoon.

Harry's next thought was interrupted by a white streak over the lake as Hedwig turned and banked towards him. With a huge grin, Harry extended his arm as the owl soared over. Hedwig alighted gently on his arm and Harry felt a tingle of her energy mixing with his own in a very pleasant and familiar way.

Harry spoke quietly to her, "Hello Girl! It's so great to see you. You are a beautiful owl, you know that?" Harry praised her while stroking her feathers. She preened in the warmth of his affections. Harry asked her about the owlery, the food, and whether she was satisfied with the hunting opportunities around the castle. Hedwig clicked and whistled in response, which Harry had become accustomed to translating. Her human was happier than he had been in weeks; that much was obvious to her. She had felt his nervousness and excitement through their bond over the last few days. Now it seems he was finally starting to calm down a bit.

They conversed for another half-hour there by the lake, before Harry announced he had to be off to his next class. Hedwig nipped his hand affectionately and set about the errand he had asked of her, a catalog from the stationers. Harry hiked back to the castle and was halfway to the Eagle's Door when he spied Hammond, Clarkson and Wright coming the other way toting their books, and his.

"Here you go, mate," Hammond said, offering Harry his bag.

"Cheers! Thanks, Jezza."

"Right, then. Shall we?" Clarkson said.

"Lead on!"

The four arrived at the Arithmancy classroom door to find the four girls and nearly all the Hufflepuffs waiting outside.

Harry was a bit taken aback when the tall witch from the welcoming feast briskly opened the door, inviting them in. Her long, straight black hair swept down past her waist as she spun and strode to her desk. Harry noticed now that her aura was actually comprised of hazy, shifting blocks of watercolor greens and golds which slid back

and forth to stack and mesh with one another. Her face was round and high-cheeked with a warm smile.

"Please be seated, everyone. Welcome to the new Introduction to Arithmancy survey course. My name is Septima Vector. As you may know, the in-depth study of arithmancy is offered to third years and above. This survey course will give you a primer of the basic arithmantic disciplines to help you decide if you want to further pursue this amazing branch of magic. Not everyone has the skill or patience for magical calculations, but for those who do, a profound understanding of how magic works can be gained with hard work and discipline. Arithmancy is crucial in spell design, in numerical divination, and in magical research and development. Arithmancers have made major contributions to magical society by inventing or improving new spells or wards, by decoding ancient magics found in places such as Egyptian tombs; and by designing magical artifacts. Now, does anyone have any questions?"

Several people did in fact have questions. Harry was back to his split-page note taking. Clarkson was on his right this time, with Padma on his left and Hermione beside her. Lisa was directly behind him. Richard leaned over and eyed Harry's muggle notebook with its precise little lines, and the two sets of notes going down the left and right pages simultaneously. Harry looked up at him. Clarkson just raised an eyebrow, shook his head and leaned back over to his desk. Harry grinned.

As before, this survey class was to cover the basics and weed out those with the skill and aptitude to progress. The same three- and five-year concentrations existed with the opportunity to take apprenticeship or journeyman exams in years six and seven.

A lengthy discussion ensued about the magical properties of numbers that Harry found baffling but interesting. Some of it paralleled geometry, some of it chemistry, and some it smelled like numerology. Apparently all three sets of rules overlapped with varying priorities. Harry had a mild headache by the end of class; he'd have to re-read the text, and maybe find a supplementary text with a different slant on the same topics to wrap his mind around arithmancy. Vector ended class by assigning a short essay and sending them off to lunch.

"Two down, two thousand to go..." Harry mused to himself. As they trooped to the Great Hall, Harry gleaned that Hammond was a bit ahead of the others on Arithmancy as the boy told Steven about the specifics of the number of twigs in a broom's tail, the length of the twigs and so forth. Apparently the spells governing a broom's aerodynamics were one of the better understood applications of arithmancy, although they were far from simple, taking a month of calculations for each new design. Inwardly Harry groaned, remembering the ease with which muggle calculators did complex multiplication and division.

Lunch was excellent in both quantity and quality, though slightly more reserved than the welcoming feast. Fruit was featured prominently in bowls every meter or so along the table; platters of cold meats and cheeses were plentiful, interspersed with baskets of warm rolls and hot trays holding portions of chicken, fish and roasted vegetables. Harry believed he would finally put on weight here at Hogwarts. He sought out a set next to Terry, and plied him with questions on arithmancy and runes. Terry had general answers, but referred Harry to a handful of texts in the Tower library for more thorough explanations.

Harry looked back from responding to Terry to see that Clarkson had vacated the spot across from him, and Kelly and Padma had slid down to be across from him. They were both looking at him intently. Harry tried very hard to not roll his eyes. They were quite a pair, with Kelly's pale complexion, blue eyes and strawberry blonde hair, and Padma's dark skin, silky raven hair and chocolate eyes.

"Hello Kelly, Padma...what can I do for you?"

Kelly blushed while Padma smiled broadly. "Just visiting for dessert. How did you find the classes this morning, Harry?" Padma answered gracefully and she peeled an orange in a single continuous spiral.

Harry addressed himself to Padma and responded in kind. Kelly seemed content to listen, and blushed a bit more whenever Harry looked at her directly. After a few minutes of friendly grilling, Harry interrupted Padma's next question with a raised index finger. He was looking at Kelly, who was now blushing furiously and looking down at her folded hands. Padma glanced at her companion.

Harry could see girl's energy field was quavering, agitated; nervous, he assumed.

"Kelly?" he asked quietly. Her eyes cut in his direction but her head stayed down.

"Kelly, look at me please." She raised her head and did so, blushing brilliantly, but meeting his brilliant green eyes. Beside her, Padma grinned.

Still quiet, Harry said "Is this the celebrity thing?" Kelly tilted her head, paused, then finally nodded, still blushing.

Harry reached across the table to touch the back of her hand. She flinched subtly. "I'm not him, you know- I mean, I'm not the hero about whom all those stories are written. That's a character, and stories some people made up to sell books. You get that, right? I'm not him; I'm just Harry."

Kelly drew both of her lips between her teeth. Harry Potter was talking to her -to HER!- and it was important - something earnest and sincere in his voice, seeking her approval, her response.

Kelly blinked a few times and looked down at his fingertips, just touching the back of her folded hands. Harry's hand moved back, and she looked at him again: the messy black hair, the scar, and a question in those brilliant green eyes.

This time she held his glance. "I get it now, Harry. I'll have to work on it a bit, but I understand what you mean."

Harry rewarded her with a warm, lop-sided grin that would stick in her memory for quite a while.

"Well said, Harry," Padma offered with a grin of her own. He rolled a shoulder in a sketch of a shrug.

Someone was waving at him from across the room, Harry noticed. One of the twins was standing on the bench at the Gryffindor table trying to get his attention. 'Aura with a right-hand twist', Harry thought, that must be Fred.

"Well ladies, it looks like I'm being summoned. I'll see you later for class?"

Harry got two nods and a "See you later, Harry" from Padma as he rose and made his way over to the Gryffindor table. The girls were whispering to each other as soon as he left.

"Harry! Have a seat!" Fred said, pointing to a spot between Ron and Neville.

Fred went on: "Neville here was just mentioning that you 'Claws have old Snape next for a double Potions class. He's a right greasy git, so be careful what you say."

"He's got a thing against anyone not in Slytherin..." George added,

"...So don't muck about!" Fred finished.

"And mind what we told you yesterday, about him," George said while looking at Harry meaningfully. Harry nodded. Addressing Ron and Neville, George clarified: "Best not to make eye contact with him at all, if it can be helped."

"And read ahead for his classes, at least three chapters!" Fred added.

The pre-game session went on like that for the remainder of the lunch period, until the platters of food vanished in a sparkle.

Harry rejoined his cohort en route back to the Ravenclaw Tower. His time the riddle was 'What always ends everything?'. Harry was cycling through various esoteric answers such as 'heat death', 'black hole collapse', 'the big crunch', and 'finite incantatum' when Lisa spoke up.

"Simple - the letter G."

The door swung open.

Harry kicked himself, mentally. He had to learn to 'think like a wizard', apparently; or maybe just more literally. Or both.



Harry followed Steven, who was muttering to himself as he trudged up the stairs to the boy's dorm: " ...letter G... never heard anything... ...ridiculous...can't be expected ..." Harry felt a little bit better that he wasn't the only one on a different frequency today.

Hedwig was preening on her perch as Harry entered the dorm room. A couple of rolled catalogs were sitting on the bed.

"Hello girl - that was fast!" She clicked her beak at him twice as if to say, 'Of course, how hard could it be?'

"Ah. Well, thanks, just the same. " Two more clicks.

"She really understands you, doesn't she?" Steven asked.

Hedwig sent him a positively sardonic look, which caused Steven's eyebrows to rise.

"Hedwig is exceedingly intelligent," Harry supplied.

"Obviously. She's your familiar then, not just your owl?" Steven asked.

"Yes, although I don't fully understand the bond yet."

"No one does, really. There are books on the affects, but the nature of the bond itself..."- Steven just shrugged, and looked Harry. They both said it together: "magic."

Harry spent the remainder of the break period ensconced in a leather recliner by the window - Flitwick's Chair, as he now thought of it -re-reading the potions text as George had advised. Being forewarned, and being a Ravenclaw, Harry found the corresponding chapters in two other alternate Potions texts within the Tower library, and read those as well. Apparently one of them was the designated class text a decade ago, and to Harry's disappointment, very little had changed since then. He noted that nearly all of his first-year cohort were doing the same; apparently word of Snape's teaching style had spread.

And so it was with no small amount of trepidation that the first-year 'Claws trekked down to the dungeons, meeting the 'Puffs en route. They arrived to find the classroom door open, so they filed in and

took seats. No one sat in the front row, apparently having all arrived at the conclusion that a few extra meters of space between them and Professor Snape was a good thing.

Harry took a moment to glance around the room. Aside from the magic in the walls, the students themselves, and the magical lights overhead, the room was largely bereft of spells. A series of elevated tables in rows occupied most of the space. Long shelves of glass jars lined three walls. The jars were of a multitude of shapes and sizes, with handwritten labels. Some of the ingredients glowed faintly in Harry's vision, but most looked inert. A glass cage at one end of the room held small live animals of some kind; Harry could see the tiny auras glowing from where he sat. 'Frogs, perhaps?' he wondered.

Harry and several others jumped as the door slammed closed behind them. Snape strode into the room, gliding forward, blacker-than-black robes billowing behind him. The same smoky silver radiance coiled about him, tinged through with rippling black streaks that orbited around him in off-kilter spirals. All of this was covered by outer layer of translucent indigo surrounding the man, fueled by the swirling smoke within. The man reached the front desk and glided to a stop. His anthracite eyes regarded them with mild disdain. The class went silent as his presence commanded their attention.

Snape gestured with a hand and a parchment rose to hover above the desk at an angle for easy reading. A dozen eyebrows went up at that.

In a slithering baritone Snape called the role, accenting and elongating syllables for emphasis. The man's aura shimmered when he said "Bloom, Kelly"; Harry presumed he knew her father the apothecary, or at least knew of him.

A pause in the roll drew Harry's attention back to Snape.

[AN: Quoting from UK edition of Philosopher's Stone, pub 1997 by Bloomsbury]

"Ah, Yes," he said softly, "Harry Potter. Our new - celebrity."

Eight sets of eyes cut to Harry. No one moved.

"Here, sir."

Snape's heavy gaze lingered on him for another five interminable seconds. Harry very carefully stared at the paper levitating in front of man.

Someone, one of the girls, coughed in back and that broke the tableau. Snape completed the role and the paper descended back to the desk.

[AN: Quoting again, same source]

Snape looked up at the class. His eyes were black like Hagrid's, but they had none of Hagrid's warmth. They were cold and empty and made you think of dark tunnels.

"You are here to learn the subtle science and exact art of potionmaking," he began. He spoke in barely more than a whisper, but they caught every word - like Professor McGonagall, Snape had the gift of keeping a class silent without effort.

"As there is little foolish wand-waving here, many of you will hardly believe this is magic. I don't expect you will really understand the beauty of the softly simmering cauldron with its shimmering fumes, the delicate power of liquids that creep through human veins, bewitching the mind, ensnaring the senses. I can teach you how to bottle fame, brew glory, even stopper death ...if you aren't as big a bunch of dunderheads as I usually have to teach."

Harry had recorded that speech word for word. He admired the delivery in spite of himself; Snape was a good orator when he wished to be.

"Potter!" said Snape suddenly. "What would I get if I added powdered root of asphodel to an infusion of wormwood?"

Harry started a bit and the sudden rise in volume. That was in their assigned reading, which he'd reviewed only an hour before. Several hands went up around the room.

"Asphodel and wormwood are used in the Draught of Living Death, Sir." Harry answered while carefully staring over the man's shoulder. All the other hands came down.

A pause, as the class waited on Snape's assessment. The black eyes glittered.

"Correct. Potter, where would you look if I told you to find me a bezoar?"

An assortment of hands rose again, but Snape's gaze never left Harry. Harry felt like a man crawling through the desert, being eyed by a buzzard to see if he were dead yet. This information was definitely not in their assigned readings; it did happen to appear in the decade-old text Harry had read earlier. It had stuck in his head from the sheer oddity of it. Pure luck, then.

"A bezoar is a amorphous stone taken from the stomach of a goat, sir, and is used to counteract many common poisons."

A longer pause, and a stronger glare from Snape that fell on Harry like a tangible thing.

"Correct. What is the difference, Potter, between monkshood and wolfsbane?" A few Ravenclaw hands rose again.

"I believe they are the same plant, sir, also known as aconite."

All other hands dropped. Snape looked down his nose at the boy.

"...Indeed. It appears you have managed to do the assigned readings."

A pause, and then that weighty glance slid from him to the class at large.

"Well? Why aren't you all copying that down?"

Harry bit his tongue. He very much wanted to point out that only one of those three answers were in the assigned reading, and asking questions outside the assignment parameters, on the FIRST day of class, was just despicable. Feeling rather sore, Harry risked a glance to his left where Hermione sat. She caught his glance with a shift of her eyes, and winked subtly at him as they all copied down the questions and answers. Harry let go a long, silent exhale. It was going to be a very long year if class continued to go this way.

The lesson continued. Snape had them pair off and attempt, without any actual instruction, to mix a simple potion for curing boils by following directions on a chalkboard. Harry was fortunate enough to pair with Ernie, who had some basic experience in potions from his mum's kitchen. He quietly showed Harry the basics of properly cutting and dicing the ingredients, and of adding the proper bits at the proper times. He even caught one step, an indicated clockwise stir, that should have been counter-clockwise according to the textbook. Harry was immensely grateful for the tutelage. Parts of the process were not unlike cooking, but parts of it were more like chemistry, and the remainder had no correlation in Harry's muggle experience.

Snape glided around the room, hovering, peering around and over them as they worked. Apparently he sufficiently unhinged little Hannah Abbott, as her cauldron boiled over into a frothing mess.

"How unfortunate, Miss Abbott. Zero for the day. Take your seat," Snape intoned with far too much schadenfreude for Harry's liking.

'This man IS a git!' Harry thought. A breeze made Harry look towards Ernie, only to find Snape looking at him from across the cauldron. Inadvertently, Harry let the man catch his eyes. Snape's lip twitched minutely, and Harry felt something pull on his...mind. Snape's aura flashed crimson, and Memories began to leap to mind, flashing by at five or six per second: Reading his books in the common room; the old potions text; Him on the train; the frost-covered floor; he and Draco at Madam Malkin's; Draco swooning in a coughing fit as Harry drew magic off of him; the handmade sign in his cupboard -" Harry squelched that pull, hard. The link didn't fizzle, didn't sputter; it just ceased to exist as the magic supporting it was yanked out and vented through Harry's left shoe into Hogwarts herself. Later that night Harry would find a dime-sized hole in his nearly new shoe. Snape recoiled as if slapped, blinking rapidly. He rolled his head side to side, causing the bones in his neck. Then he straightened and glided away, without a word spoken.

Ernie was looking wide-eyed at Harry, then at Snape's retreating form, then back at Harry.

"All-Alright there, Harry?"

Harry himself blinked slowly, then drew in a long breath. That hadn't gone well, but it wasn't the disaster it could have been, either.

"I think so, yeah. You?"

Ernie leaned in, and in a whisper asked "Was he legitimizing you?"

Harry nodded minutely at him.

"And you stopped it?"

"Not exactly...I sort of shut it down instead. But he saw...things."

Ernie looked over his shoulder, and frowned. "Talk to me after class, yeah?"

"Alright."

Ernie straightened up with a nod, and resumed stirring their potion.

Snape walked by again a few minutes later, but only glanced at their cauldron and he glided by. The rest of the class passed with out incident. Snape assigned a reading topic and two feet of parchment due in a week's time. Harry felt that heavy glare on his back again as he made his way out of the dungeon classroom.

Ten feet out into the hall, Harry lost it. "That absolutely SUCKED! What is that GITs PROBLEM?"

Clarkson's hand landed on his shoulder from behind.

"Cheer up, mate, you handled it well. He was really trying to trip you up there in the beginning, and you actually knew the answers! I think you impressed him!"

Hermione came up on his right side. "Language, Harry! But Richard's right, you handled it very well. Don't let him get under your skin."

"It's not my skin I'm worried about," Harry muttered under his breath, followed by a "Cheers, Mate," directed to Clarkson.

Hermione leaned in closer, and whispered "What is that supposed to mean, Harry?"

Harry pulled them over to the side of the hallway and into a currently unoccupied classroom. His mannerisms were so agitated Hermione knew something was clearly wrong. He led her to the far end of the room, at the back furthest from the door.

"He was in my head, Hermione, he started pulling memories right out of my mind! He looked at me, and he whispered a spell, and he...He had no right to...and no REASON to! What the HELL was he doing that for?"

Hermione had gone pale. Her friend, the hero of the wizarding world, had just been mentally assaulted, and for no good reason. Harry saw purple and scarlet bands flash across her radiant aura.

"What...what did you sense, Harry? What did he see?"

Breathing hard, Harry answered, "Just-just random memories, I guess; Me studying an hour ago; The train ride. My trip to Diagon alley. Some...things from home. He was looking for something, but he didn't get it."

"And he stopped it there?"

"No, I shut it down when I figured out what was happening. It just all happened so FAST...that greasy, obnoxious, bat-nosed bastard!"

"Language, Harry. YOU shut the spell down?"

Harry looked at her. 'What the hell', he reasoned. 'Snape already knows, now.'

"Yes, I shut the spell down. I ripped the magic out of the spell, and the link dropped. Snape didn't expect that. I hope it gave him a wicked headache."

Hermione's eyes widened at that, then immediately narrowed as she thought. "How did you... how is that possible, Harry?"

Harry sighed. "This is one of those things that I wanted to tell you about, to ask your help with, when we had some basic occlumency

skills." Harry ran a hand through his already disheveled hair. He met her eyes. "It's like this, Hermione. Without being too specific, because SOMEONE might pick it out of your brain," -she nodded for him to continue - " I apparently feel magic differently than most wizards. And I can sort of ask it to move around for me, and it will. I ripped the magic out of Snape's spell and gave it back to Hogwarts."

Hermione was looking at him as if he'd spoken Mandarin once again. He had to smile a bit in spite of himself. She addressed herself to speak two or three times, and then said "Sorry...you what?"

"I pulled the magic out of his spell, and fed it back to Hogwarts."

"Okay... I think I understand the first part, but the second part-what does that MEAN, exactly?"

"Hermione, this whole castle is saturated with magic. It's humming with it, literally. "

Both of her eyebrows rose.

"And you can... hear... it?"

"Er-yeah, if I listen for it. I kind of tune it out now, or it keeps me awake at night."

Both of her eyebrows were nearly in her hairline now.

"Is it...humming now?"

"Yeah, 'course." Harry stared at her. "You don't believe me, do you?"

"Well I... I want to Harry, but that's pretty a pretty extraordinary claim..."

"-and extraordinary claims require extraordinary proof," Harry finished. "Alright Hermione, let's see if we can't help you hear Hogwarts for yourself."

She started at that, and then looked at him with equal parts curiosity and apprehension. "Really?"



"Yes, why not? I think I can show you, if you really want to know."

She drew both her lips into her mouth and worried them for a second or three, but Harry knew he had her; she'd have to know what Hogwarts sounded like. "What do I have to do?"

Harry stepped over to the exterior wall nearest the windows, and beckoned her over. He touched the wall for a moment and heard the deep choir that was Hogwarts' voice. Harry pulled his hand away, and said "put your hand right there, where mine just was." Hermione did so, touch the wall gingerly at first, then laying her palm flat on the cool stone, fingers spread.

"Harry, there's nothing-"

Her voice cut off as Harry's hand came gently down on top of hers. The memory of the train ride experience flew fleetingly through her mind, but she was distracted by the feeling in her palm, a warm honey-like sensation flowing through her spread fingers. Her eyes saw nothing, but she FELT it there, gliding between her fingers like thick, warm honey. And then she heard it - felt it at first, really - a vibration in her wrist, then her own magic touched it, and a chorus of low pitched notes appeared in the back of her mind, like a dozen cellos and bases all playing Bach Preludes once... beautiful, deep, peaceful harmonies weaving together and over one another.

"You hear it?" came Harry's voice close by her ear.

"Yes! It's...It's amazing, Harry!" she said loudly over the music playing in her head.

Harry grinned. "You don't have to shout, Hermione, I'm right here," he said with a smile. She'd been staring at her hand, which still appeared perfectly normal, but now she turned her head to glance at Harry, who was standing very close. The green eyes were flecked with gold and Hermione was reminded again, very suddenly, that this was no normal boy at her side. He nodded at her, and she nodded back. He withdrew his hand from hers, and the music slowly faded away to just an echo there in the back of her mind, indistinguishable from a memory. She carefully lifted her hand from the wall, and then patted the stone very gently.

Harry took one step away, then, and she caught her breath. "Wow. Harry, I..." She shook her head.

"Yeah." He paused, then asked "I'm curious, did you hear deep voices singing?"

"...No, I heard cellos and bases, the big ones, playing a famous piece by Bach. It was soooo beautiful, Harry..."

"Huh. I hear low voices singing harmonies, like a male choir."

"I guess... I guess it depends on how our magic touches the castle's magic?" Hermione offered.

Harry tilted his head at that. "Sure. Okay. Why not?" He grinned at her, then, a full beaming smile at being able to share something like this with somebody, -no, with a friend. Hermione smiled back, having almost the exact same thought. Hermione's eyes went wide then, and silver radiance rippled around her brow.

"So you took the magic out of Professor Snape's spell, and grounded it back into Hogwarts?"

"Yep. Sort of like a lightning rod."

Hermione just looked at him with a raised eyebrow.

Harry tapped his scar. "I know - ironic, huh?"

Hermione shook her head, smiling. "Is anything ever simple with you, Harry?"

"Not really, no." He gestured back to the classroom door, and they collected their abandoned book bags along the way. As they neared the closed door, Harry said "Look, it's really, really important that we learn to keep our thoughts to ourselves as soon as possible. In the meantime, don't meet Snape's eyes, or Dumbledore's for that matter. If you see your own memories flashing before your mind's eye at an inappropriate time, they're reading you. Do whatever you have to do to stop it, Hermione."

"I understand, Harry, but I really don't think Professor Dumbledore would-"

"I know he's the headmaster, but trust me Hermione, he's not all sweetness and light. He's probably the most powerful wizard in the world, and you know what they say about absolute power..."

"I know, Harry, but you should tell someone in a position of authority what happened! It's their responsibility to help you!"

Harry sighed. He walked over to the nearest desk and set his bag down again. Hermione stood near the door, watching him. 'Think it through, Potter', he ordered himself. 'Hermione looks up to authority figures,' he reasoned. 'Probably because they were the ones to protect her from most of the bullying at her original school. Would that we were all so lucky.'

He looked to her, and after a moment Harry said "OK, Hermione. I'll grant you that I should be able to go to an authority figure and ask for help," - a gleam of victory danced in her eyes - "BUT, I reserve the right to decide to whom I speak, and how much I say." She deflated a little, but nodded.

"Just talk to somebody, Harry. Talk to McGonagall, or Flitwick, or one of the prefects."

"Frankly, I'm not yet sure who I can trust, Hermione. Except you, of course, and probably the twins, mostly. But since I'm meeting Professor Flitwick this afternoon anyway, I'll see if he might have any, er, general advice."

"Good. You know, not everyone in a position of authority is apathetic, or incompetent."

"I hope you're right, Hermione."

She raised an eyebrow at him.

"Oh, alright. You're usually right," Harry said with half a smile. He hoisted his book bag once again and they left the classroom, headed for Ravenclaw Tower.

About halfway there, Harry spotted Ernie Macmillan leaning against the wall with a book in his hand. As they approached, he looked up and gave them a small grin.

"Hello Harry, Hermione. Might I speak to you for a moment, Harry?" he said, gesturing to an alcove off the hallway. Harry traded glances with Hermione and gave her a tiny nod.

"Alright then, carry on boys. I'll see you at dinner, Harry."

As she stepped away, Harry and Ernie strode over to the alcove, which turned out to be a small storage room of sorts, with two dusty suits of armor and a large hearth in it. They moved to the rear of the room nearest the hearth, and Ernie conjured a small ball of fire in it to provide a bit of light and heat.

"Neat spell!" Harry said with a small grin.

"What? Oh-thanks Harry. It's nothing, really. Mum always had me tend the hearth at home, and -" Ernie broke off as Harry's face went carefully blank.

Ernie turned back to stare at the fire. "...um. Sorry, Harry. I hadn't thought. I guess your relatives..."

"Hate magic, actually; every single one of them."

"Wow."

"Yeah." Harry was staring at the cheerful little fire now, too.

"So, you never learned..."

"About magic? Not one bloody thing, 'till I got my Hogwarts letter."

"So, everything you know about magic, you learned in three weeks?"

"Closer to four, actually, but yes. I'd love to know half of what you learned just growing up in the magical world, Ernie. I'm out of my depth, here."

You could have knocked Ernie MacMillan over with a feather after that. He was sitting next to Harry Potter - the Harry Potter - having a casual chat, normal as you please, and Harry Potter was envious of him.

"You're not kidding, are you, Harry?"

"No."

"Then...then maybe I can help you with some of that."

It was Harry's turn to be surprised, then. "Sorry?"

"I mean, some of the things kids learn from our parents, about how the magical world works. I mean really works - the culture, the politics, the government. Books will only get you so far, Harry. "

"You would do that?"

"For you? 'Course! Once a week, like a study session. You ask, I'll answer."

"Wow...I...thanks, Ernie. Really. That'd be a huge help."

"It's no trouble, Harry. Though you can bribe me with chocolate frogs if you like. Maybe an hour on Saturdays, after dinner?"

"I'll be there," Harry said, offering his hand.

"Good," Ernie said with a shake.

"Good," Harry agreed. "Oh, and I got something for you."

"Really?"

Harry rifled through his book bag and produced the two rolled catalogs from the stationers in Hogsmeade. Ernie's face lit up in recognition when he saw them.

"Apparently they have an affiliated store in muggle Glasgow. Those are the magical and muggle catalogs. So have a read, and see what catches your eye."

"That's brilliant, thanks Harry!"

"Pleased to do it."

Ernie's face grew serious, then grave. "Look, Harry... about Snape. My older brother Jerry had him a few years back. He swears Snape tried to legilimize him on several different occasions. And Jerry would know, as he's an Occlumens."

Harry nodded. "How did he learn?"

"Well, Dad showed him the basics, but he got formal training on the job. He's a barrister now, handles estates and wills and that sort of thing. Has to keep his client's information confidential, you know." Harry nodded again.

"So, what can I do about Snape?"

"Honestly, you should learn occlumency, Harry. I'll warrant that you have things in your head you'd rather keep private."

"I've gotten a booklet on it from the Weasley twins, and I've started the meditation exercises, but it will take me a few months at least to be halfway capable. What do I do until then?" He asked, looking Ernie.

"I might be able to get you one of Jerry's old books from home. In the meantime, you'll want a warning charm attached to something you always carry; it whistles when someone tries to legilimize you." He tapped the tie-tack on his chest meaningfully. "Metal works best, maybe a pendant, a watch, an earring..."

Harry looked at him with a raised eyebrow.

"Right, no earrings then. How about your glasses? You've always got them on."

"That's brilliant, Ernie!"

Ernie actually blushed. "Sorry, but I don't know the charm. Jerry made mine."

"That's alright, Ernie. I just happen to know a Charms Master," Harry said with a half grin. Ernie grinned back. They confirmed a time and place for Saturday, shook on it, and parted company for now.

'No time like the present,' Harry thought as he made his way to the seventh floor and Flitwick's office.

Fifteen minutes and two shifting staircases later, Harry Potter knocked on Professor Flitwick's door. A tiny peep hole about four feet off the ground went dark for an instant, and then the door opened.

"Come in, Mister Potter, come in!"

"Thank you, sir. I appreciate you taking time to see me today."

"Not at all, Harry, not at all. Do have a seat, please." The professor gestured to a high-backed wooden stool something like a bar chair stationed at one corner of his overcrowded desk. Harry glanced briefly around; stacks of books and papers lined the shelves covering three walls, clearly aiming to engulf the place, but held in check and organized by the efforts of the Charms Master. Knick-Knacks and trinkets decorated nearly every horizontal space not covered by books and papers. Most of them looked magical in Harry's vision; charmed, he assumed. A model of the Wright Brother's airplane hung from the ceiling, its propellers spinning lazily as it twirled slowly in place. Harry approached the offered stool. Its leather seat glowed a faint orange to his senses.

"Pardon me, sir, but the stool is spelled... is it safe?"

Flitwick stared at him for a moment. Then, a small smile broke out on his face that reminded Harry strongly of a Goblin grin. "Quite safe, Mister Potter. It's merely a height-adjustment charm to make sure my visitors are comfortable. You may say 'up','down' or 'stop' to adjust it as you wish."

"Ah. Right. Thank you, sir," Harry replied, and sat. "DOWN, please," he said, and the stool slowly began to shrink. "STOP" caused it to halt when he was approximately eye-level with his Professor, who had seated himself at his desk.

"Now then Harry, what can I do for you?"

"A couple of things, actually, sir. I was wondering if we could perhaps talk more at some point about the ability to see magical signatures," Flitwick smiled broadly at this, "...and I was wondering if

you could perhaps charm something for myself and a friend, it's important."

"Oh?"

"Yes, sir. May we speak freely in here?"

Flitwick said "One moment," and turned behind him to tap the wall in three specific places with his wand. Harry observed faint curtains of spiraling crimson beads rise to the ceiling.

"No sound or light will leave this room now, Mister Potter. You may speak freely."

"I understand that there is an alarm charm to alert one when they are being legilimized. I'd like to have two objects so charmed, if you'll agree."

Flitwick's eyebrows went about as high as they'd ever been. Not many first-years had ever surprised him so thoroughly.

"...I see. May I ask, Harry, why you feel you need such a charm?"

Harry frowned. This was the crux of the conversation, then. How far could he trust the man across the desk?

"Sir, before I answer, I need to ask whether what we discuss here will stay between us, or make its way to the headmaster and other faculty."

"Ah." Flitwick tilted his head and stared at Harry for a long moment then. Harry perceived a faint golden glow lingering in the irises of the man's eyes, and had the distinct feeling he was being measured. Flitwick frowned, and brandished his wand toward the ceiling.

"I knew your parents rather well, Harry. Your secrets are safe with me, provided they do not endanger your life." He lifted his wand an inch. "I, Filius J. Flitwick, do hereby swear on my magic that I will keep secret what is discussed here today with Harry James Potter, until such time as he releases me from this obligation, or until his life be in danger for want of this information. So mote it be." A gentle blue glow surrounded the man for a moment. Harry's eyes went a bit wide, never having witnessed a magical oath before.



"Wow. Um... thank you, sir."

"That's quite alright, Harry. I have need of such an oath from time to time, though usually with...older students."

"Right. And do I presume correctly that you are immune to legilimency, sir?"

"Indeed. A benefit of my grandfather's bloodline."

"Ah."

"...and the Alert Charm, Harry?" Flitwick prompted.

"...Sir, where you aware that there are two Legilimens amongst the staff here at Hogwarts?"

"Two? I always presumed Albus was, but..."

"Severus Snape legilimized me today, sir. I'm certain of it. He went rooting through my memories in the middle of a Potions class today, for no good reason."

"Severus? Well, that's not terribly surprising, given his...history. But why do you believe he attempted to legilimize you, Harry?"

"Not attempted to, sir, he did legilimize me. He caught my glance, and whispered a word- a spell, I assume - and then random memories started pouring through my mind at a high rate of speed. He started with memories of me studying, sir. I believe he was trying to verify that I actually knew the answers to the off-topic questions he had posed. Then memories of recent magical experiences came through, then memories of my...relatives." Flitwick's eyebrows, which had returned to normal, were once again climbing his forehead. "I terminated the spell as quickly as I could, and he flinched when I did. I am certain, sir. He invaded my mind without a good reason. Shouldn't that be illegal?"

Flitwick's frown deepened. "Oh, it is, Mister Potter -illegal on an unsuspecting adult, and all the more so on an underage minor."

"Really?" Harry asked.

"Indeed, Harry, Indeed."

Harry looked towards the window and thought for a few moments. He turned back to the waiting man, and said "I am not inclined to press charges right now, sir."

"Hmm. Just as well, as they could not be made to stick, anyway."

Harry raised his index finger. "But I want it to stop, sir. I have begun studying occlumency, but it will be some months before I'm proficient. Hence the charm."

Flitwick held Harry's gaze for a long beat, then sighed. "Very well, Harry. What is it you would have me charm?"

Carefully, Harry removed his glasses and set them down on the desk between them.

"Ah; very clever."

Flitwick spun around in his chair, picked up a small green unlabeled book from a shelf, consulted its index, and then browsed to a page. Harry watched patiently. The Charms Master closed the book, spun back around to Harry, and brandished his wand once again.

Harry watched entranced as a long string of latin flowed in the Professor's voice, accompanied by at least ten or twelve wand motions. Harry caught the words "Legilimens" and his own name as components of the spell. With a final gesture Flitwick tapped the frames of his glasses lightly. They glowed scarlet-purple for two long seconds, then the light faded. Flitwick picked them up, cleaned them on a bit of silk, and handed them back to Harry.

"...er...wow. Thank you very much, sir."

"You are very welcome, Harry. It will deflect an attack briefly, and whistle when one is detected."

"I understand. How long?"

Flitwick glanced at Harry. " The deflection? Four or five seconds at most."

Harry nodded.

"And the other item? For Miss Granger, I presume?"

"Yes, that's...wait, how did you know?"

Flitwick grinned at him, then, and Harry got a sense of the much younger man he once was. "The story of your train ride has made the rounds already, Harry. Apparently you froze some slytherin boys solid, turned them into ice cubes when they threatened Miss Granger." Flitwick said this with a laugh in his voice.

"I never froze anybody, sir, honestly! It was just a little frost! I mean, they walked out under their own power and everything," Harry said hotly.

"I believe you, Harry. The Hogwarts gossip vine is a magic all its own."

"Apparently," Harry said, still partly in a huff over being the subject of yet more fanciful stories.

"Yes. Well, what are we charming for Miss Granger?"

"I don't actually know, sir. I thought maybe a sickle?"

"Ah. I sometimes forget how young you really are, Harry. Let's try something a little more attractive, shall we?" Flitwick reached to a well-used box on a side shelf lifted it to his desk. He opened it to reveal a collection of small compartments, each with various metal shapes and charms in them.

"Let me see, it was in here somewhere...", he piled eight or ten things on the desk, little metal sculptures of brooms, cats, flowers.

"Ah, here it is." Flitwick held up a small metal lightning-bolt charm with a hoop at one end.

"Sowulo?" Harry asked.

"Correct! Started Elder Futhark, have you?" Flitwick said, amused.

"Yes, sir."

"You approve?"

Harry shrugged. "Sure ... I mean, yes, thank you, sir."

Flitwick chuckled as he replaced the other charms in the box and restored it to its usual place. He repeated the long incantation perfectly, with the substitution of Hermione's name in the charm, and tapped the pendant with his wand as before. It glowed as well before fading to normalcy once again. Flitwick threaded a silver chain through the hoop and passed it to Harry.

"Here you are, Harry. May it serve her well."

"Thank you very much indeed, Professor."

Flitwick reclined a bit in his chair. "Now, let's talk about how you spotted me yesternight in the common room?"

"Oh. As I said then, I'm able to see certain types of magical signatures. Your obfuscation charm was like a big orange sign to me, sir."

"Truly?"

Harry nodded.

"That's fascinating! You know there are a few magical devices that produce that effect - the eye of Vance is one - " the man's voice picked up in pitch and speed as he got excited about the topic.

"Yes, sir, you mentioned that."

"Quite right, quite right. Now you said the obfuscation spell was visible to you as an orange cloud, yes?" Flitwick asked with enthusiasm.

"Yes, sir. It was pulsing slightly, which I took to mean a breathing being, or perhaps a heartbeat."

"Really!" Flitwick was almost bouncing in his seat now. Clearly he was a Ravenclaw at heart to be this enamored of a new discovery.

"I was...wondering, professor, if you might not know of a way to dampen the effect somewhat. It's rather a lot of eyestrain looking at all the magical signatures residing here at Hogwarts."

"Well yes, I guess it would-" Flitwick stopped in mid-sentence and turned back to stare at Harry as he processed what he just heard. A long pause followed.

"Pardon me, Harry, but did I just understand you correctly that seeing all the magical signatures here at Hogwarts gives you eye-strain?"

Harry squirmed a bit in his seat. "Yes, sir."

Flitwick leaned forward in excitement, right to the edge of his chair. "Just what types of magical signatures do you see, Harry?"

"I presume this would be covered under your oath to me, sir?"

Flitwick nodded.

"Pretty much all of them, sir."

Flitwick fell out of his chair.

Harry hopped down from his own chair to help the small man up, and back into his seat.

"Thank you, Harry..." the Charms Master said as he straightened his glasses and robes, blinking rapidly. He shook his head once and looked Harry out of the corner of his eye.

"All of them, you say?" Flitwick said with a mixture of awe and disbelief.

Harry nodded. "Pretty much, yes sir."

"Hmmm. You'll forgive me if I ask for a demonstration?"

"I'd be surprised if you didn't, sir."

Flitwick grinned. "Very well. Can you tell me how many magical objects there are in this room?"

Harry glanced about, naming things as he went. "I see magical energies in the floor; the outer wall; the windows; the umbrella in the corner; that red book on the first shelf," - Flitwick's eyebrows rose as Harry pointed to it - "the black book on the second shelf; the goblin figurine, second shelf; the silver trophy on the third shelf; five or six small magical objects in a box on the third shelf; dagger on the second shelf; one small spider in the far left corner; the airplane above us - just the props, not the whole plane," - Flitwick's eyebrows were in his hairline now - "the second quill on your right; something in your jacket pocket; the large leather book behind you; the tea set, well just the pot, really; ourselves of course; and another spider in the shelf under your desk. Sir." Harry was half grinning by the time he was done, mostly at Flitwick's increasingly amusing reactions.

"...Incredible."

Harry didn't really know what to say to that, so he kept silent. Flitwick gave him that measuring stare again for eight or ten seconds.

"That's a rather remarkable ability you have there, Mister Potter."

"Apparently, yes sir. I was a bit disappointed to learn that it's not so common."

"Indeed not. Most of us have to thoroughly charm our glasses to get even a semblance of that skill."

"Really? that's possible?"

"Oh yes, although it's rather limited by comparison. Usually used for detecting cursed objects and the like."

"Hmm."

"I'm curious - are you able to tell the type of magic used on an object, Mister Potter?"

"Not at present, no. I mean, they all look different, you know? But I haven't begun to correlate the appearance to anything specific, as yet."

"Ah. Still, this is fascinating!" the man responded enthusiastically. "This opens up a whole world of possibilities for you, Harry!" Harry lifted his eyebrows in question.

"Spell design, healing, curse breaking, warding and ward breaking, ancient magical artifacts - the list is endless!"

Harry sat back in his chair, a bit stunned by that thought: magical sight as a means of employment. After a moment, he looked back to Flitwick.

The Charms Master said "You were right to be cautious, Harry, and you should continue to be. This skill of yours is rather unusual. I would recommend keeping this knowledge to yourself for the time being."

"Yes, sir. I was wondering if you would be willing to help me work on it, though? To refine my abilities?"

Flitwick looked a child at Christmas. "I'd be delighted to, Harry. Perhaps an unofficial tutoring session, Tuesdays and Thursdays after dinner."

"That would be super, Professor. I suppose I'll say I have detentions," Harry offered with a grin.

Flitwick nodded. "That should work, yes."

Harry paused for a long inhale and exhale. This had gone better than he'd hoped.

"Anything else, Mister Potter?"

"Thank you for keeping my confidence, sir. I really do appreciate it."

"You're quite welcome, Harry. Off to dinner with you, now."

Harry rose and gathered up his things. Halfway to the door, he turned to Flitwick and said "Sir?"

"Harry?"

Quietly, Harry said "I was wondering, if...if one of these days, you'd be willing to tell me what you remember about my parents?"

Flitwick's eyes went a bit soft, and a bit sad. His hand landed on Harry's shoulder.

"Certainly, Harry. I would be glad to."

Harry gave him a small nod. "Thank you, sir. For everything." Flitwick patted his shoulder once in response.

Harry hoisted his book bag, stepped to the door, and grasped the handle.

"Allow me to remove the lockdown spell from the door for you, Harry."

Mentally, Harry smirked. "That's okay, sir. I got it." And he yanked the magic out of the locking and silencing spells on the door, watching the now empty little scarlet beads of magic clatter silently to the floor and sink slowly through the flagstones. Harry opened the door and strolled out, leaving behind a Charms master now entering in the hallway with his jaw hanging. Flitwick watched the shock of messy black hair rapidly disappearing down the spiral staircase. 'This one would be Interesting, all right!'

He called after Harry with humor in his voice: "That will be a detention, Mister Potter. Tomorrow evening, after dinner!"

Harry's voice floated up from several flights down: "Yes SIR, see you then."

Flitwick shook his head twice, and turned back to his now un-spelled door.

Harry arrived in the Ravenclaw common room to find most of his cohort and many other 'Claws scattered about doing homework or with their heads in books. The room was warm, and smelled faintly of popcorn. Lisa was sprawled out on her stomach on the floor near the hearth, a book in her hands and a bowl at her side. The only sounds were the fireplace, the occasional turning of pages, and the sound of shoes on one of the upper balconies. 'It would be easy to start thinking of this place as home,' Harry thought. For practice,



Harry quickly counted the living magical signatures in the room. 'Seventeen down here, six above, and what appears to be a cat in the corner.'

Harry went up to his dorm room to find it currently empty. Someone had turned Clarkson's bed pink, and added frills. Harry grinned.

Some time later, Harry heard the two quiet chimes of the small signal bell used in Ravenclaw tower, alerting students the next period was about to start - in this case, Dinner. The quiet shuffling of many feet and snippets of conversation greeted Harry as he descended the stairs from his dorm.

Jeremy, Richard and Steven had apparently just arrived, and Jeremy greeted him with an offered handshake. "H'lo, Harry! All right there?"

"Going well, yeah; and you?"

"Never better."

Harry said "Oh, about your bed: IT WASN'T ME, mate. I swear!"

"My WHAT?" Clarkson said, eyes going wide. He looked at his other two companions, who were glowing with mirth and doing their best not to laugh. Clarkson turned and jogged up to their dorm room, dodging older students as he went. He returned moments later, shouting about how that was "ENTIRELY UNACCEPTABLE!" and how "SOMEONE WOULD PAY!", which just sent Hammond and Wright into gales of laughter.

"YOU!" Clarkson said, glaring at his compatriots.

"RE-LAX," said Hammond. "They'll be gone in an hour," at which Clarkson looked a bit more relieved. "...or what it a day?" Hammond asked, looking to Steven, who just shrugged. Clarkson's jaw dropped again.

Harry grinned. "Come on, let's eat."

Ten minutes and two staircases later found them in the Great Hall. Hermione had sandwiched herself between Prefect Penny and Padma, and the three of them were had their heads together about

something already. Harry squeezed in between Steven and Michael Corner. They ate the fill and discussed giant squid, which apparently Michael found exceptionally interesting.

As dinner wound down, Harry scooped up a second treacle, lifted his plate and excused himself. He strolled over to the half-empty Hufflepuff table, to where Ernie sat with another first year Harry recognized. Some older 'Puffs held down the far end of the table. Ernie looked up at his approach.

"Harry! Come for a visit then?"

"Yeah, thought I might. You don't mind?"

"Not at all. This is Justin Finch-Fletchley, he's in our year."

Harry set his plate down and offered the boy his hand. "Harry Potter, pleased to meet you." Justin went a bit wide-eyed for a second but recovered nicely, and shook the offered hand. "My pleasure, Harry. Fond of treacle, eh?"

"Absolutely! The food here is excellent, and there's so much of it!"

The other two boys grinned at him.

"So Harry, Ernie here tells me you were illuminating him as to the ways of muggle stationary", Justin said, pointing at the catalogs near Ernie's plate. Harry's eyebrows went up.

"I went to primary at Eaton Vale in Kensington," Justin added. Harry had no idea what that meant, beyond the fact that 'primary' meant ordinary schooling. "We learned to write properly in longhand. The fountain pen is a good idea, Harry. It works like a quill, but without the mess."

"Exactly right," Harry said, pleased to have arrived back on a safer topic. "As I understand it, the Hogsmeade stationers have an arrangement with a muggle stationers in Glasgow, and they can provide anything from their muggle catalog in a few days' time."

Justin nodded appreciatively. "Mind if I get in on that, then?"

"The more, the merrier," Ernie said, and flipped the catalog around so they could all peruse it together.

Harry had just lifted his head out of their huddle when a hand gently ruffled his hair. The two boys across from him were staring wide-eyed at the person behind him. Harry caught a glimmer of electric pink out of the corner of his eye.

"Wotcher, Harry. Nice to see you!" Said a voice, already walking away. Harry turned to see the Pink Girl from the intersection all those weeks ago, strolling away arm in arm with an older boy whose aura seemed to sparkle. Harry barked out a laugh. Wasn't life odd?

Harry turned back to look at Ernie and Justin, who were still goggling at him.

"You know..."-Justin whispered- "Tonks?"

"We met once, yeah. Why?"

"Harry, everybody keeps warning us not to talk to her, or even say her name - her real name, that is. They say she hexes anybody who does! She's bloody scary, Harry!" Justin had trepidation in his voice, and Ernie was nodding along. They both looked honestly worried for Harry's safety.

Harry looked at them, shook his head and grinned.

"She introduced herself to ME, actually. AND shook my hand."

"No!"

"Yup," Harry said with a grin.

"Wow," Ernie said, looking back to the doorway through which Tonks had departed.

"Your reputation for bravery is further enhanced," Justin said with a grin, which spread to Ernie's face when he heard it. Harry grinned back, and chomped the last of his dessert.

"Alright lads, what are we ordering?" Ernie said. The order was promptly written - a pen each, some spare nibs, and more

notebooks for Harry - monies were gathered, and Justin was nominated to place the order tomorrow. The last of the platters vanished in a sparkle, signaling the end of the meal. Soon after that the boys stood to go, exchanging handshakes once more. Harry felt like he had perhaps made another ally in Justin, and had a good start towards real friendship with Ernie.

Fifteen minutes later found Harry back in the Ravenclaw common room, sequestered at a desk under the window. He was revising from his half-size notebook into two smaller ones, a black one one for class notes and a blue one for his own ideas on magic and energy. The former was filling gradually, but the later was already more than half full. Runes figured heavily in his initial ideas, both as sources and drains for magic and possibly energy. Despite the debacle of today's class, he wasn't ready to give up on Potions yet. Snape, however, he HAD written off. He summarized his thoughts on the meeting with Flitwick, designated as "C.M." for Charms Master. As he was reviewing tomorrow's schedule, Hermione dropped lightly into the seat across from him. As the feel of her aura was familiar to him by now, Harry was 95% sure it was her from two meters away.

"Hi, Hermione," he said, without looking up from his three notebooks.

"Hello, Harry. What ARE you doing, exactly?"

He looked up at that. "Revising?"

"From three different books?"

"I have a system."

Hermione just nodded. She was rather fond of her own system. A short pause, and then:

"So?" she asked.

"Hmmm?" Harry asked, still copying.

Hermione leaned forward, practically nose to nose with him. "Did you speak to anybody about what happened today?" She said very quietly and very urgently.

Harry looked up and saw the concern in her eyes.

"Yes I did," Harry said, capping his pen and stashing it in his robes.

Hermione huffed. "And?"

Harry said what he suspected she wanted to hear. "Our head of house was very helpful."

Hermione's head rocked back slightly at that, and a somewhat triumphant smile came to her face. "Ha. I KNEW it. What will happen to Professor Snape?"

"Nothing," Harry replied.

Hermione's satisfied smile cracked. "Nothing?"

Harry wondered if it was odd that some part of his brain was already predicting Hermione's responses and expressions.

"Apparently, Professor Flitwick believes no charges could be made to stick. He's politically shielded by Dumbledore."

'Cue crestfallen expression', some part of Harry's brain said. 'And...there it is.'

Hermione looked crestfallen. "Man, that sucks!" she said with a stomp of her foot.

"Language, Hermione," Harry said with a grin. She blushed but managed to glare at him.

"So we're on our own, then?" she asked heatedly. "Fodder for the mind rapist?"

"Not exactly," Harry said with half a grin.

She squinted at him. "Why are you grinning?"

Harry thought back to one of their conversations on the train ride. "Because I know something you don't know," he answered in his best Inigo Montoya impression.

Hermione huffed a breath that floated her bangs up for a moment, then laughed quietly at him. She clasped her hands in front of her, and regarded Harry with a look.

"And what is that?" she said in a horrible Wesley impression.

"I...", Harry said, pulling a slender silver chain from inside pocket of his robes and sliding it across the table to her, "...am not left-handed!"

Hermione shook her head and smiled in spite of herself. Leave it to Harry Potter to quote the Princess Bride at her. It was her first choice on father/daughter movie nights back home. With a smile, she said "Harry, that makes no sense!"

"But I'm not!" Harry argued, using his own voice again.

"What's this, anyway? Sowulo?" her eyes tracked between the pendant and his scar.

"We have an ally. That pendant is now charmed to detect legilimency attacks. It will repel them briefly, and whistle if someone attempts to legilimize you."

"Really?" Hermione asked, studying the small pendant intently now.

"Yes, Really. You'll need to wear it or keep it near your person until your occlumency is workable."

Hermione seemed to deflate a little, then. Her expression went serious. Quietly she said "Thank you so much, Harry. You've no idea how much the thought of that...man rifling through my head has worried me."

"You're welcome. You can swap the chain if you wish. The pendant carries the charm."

Hermione nodded, and slipped it over her head. She brought the rune up in front of her nose for a moment, studying it closely. Her eyes clicked back to Harry.

"Why Sowulo?" she asked. Harry rolled a shoulder in response.

"Professor Flitwick picked it, for the symbolism I expect. Who am I to argue?"

"I like it," Hermione stated, and dropped the charm inside her sweater. "Only our first week here, and Harry Potter is already giving me jewelry," she said with a teasing lilt to her voice.

Harry made a horrified face when he processed what she said. Hermione laughed at him. "Don't worry, Harry. No one will know I have it, I promise."

Harry raised his eyebrows at her. Hermione made a little 'x' over her heart with a fingertip, which earned her a lopsided grin from the boy across the table.

"Just be safe, Hermione. That thing won't protect you for long - a few seconds at most. You'll still need to be careful."

"And I will be. Thank you, Harry."

"How did you leave things with Professor Flitwick?"

"Oh, he's giving me detention. Lots of them, in fact."

Both of Hermione's eyebrows went up.

"Private tutoring," Harry said quietly.

"Ah. For the...train thing?"

Harry nodded. "Please don't spread that around."

"No problem, Harry."

"I might need you to corroborate the detention story every now and again."

"What are friends for?" she said with a soft smile.

"Yeah."

Harry collected his books into a pile. "I'm beat. Long day, you know?"

"Yes, I do," she answered.

"Breakfast?"

Hermione nodded, and stood to go. "See you then."

She'd only gotten four steps away when she heard Harry say "Have fun storming the castle!" Hermione flashed him a grin over her shoulder as she climbed the first step to the dorms. Harry checked the clock over the mantle; twelve minutes to curfew. He sighed and levered himself up out of the chair, then plodded over to the dormitory steps.

Apparently someone had been studying ahead on color-change charms, because nearly everything in the dorm room was sporting vivid shades of green, neon pink, scarlet, and violent purple. Including Hammond, at the moment. His upper torso and face were purple; he was pink from waist to knees, and bright green from there down.

"Yeesh," Harry said upon seeing him.

"Harry! Oh thank god, you've got to help me, mate!" Hammond pleaded.

"I'm pretty sure I don't want to get in the middle of this. Sorry, Jezza."

"Told ya," Steven said from behind a book. He lay in bed reading, with one huge scarlet dot on his blue pajamas. His bed, however, looked like a meltdown at a Crayola factory.

"Gahhh!" Hammond replied. "Could you help me cancel a bit of that, then? Before he gets out of the shower?" he asked, gesturing to Clarkson's frilly nightmare of a bed. The bed still sported a pink undercoat and frills, but now had an overcoat of huge gumdrop splotches of color as well.

Harry looked it over. "Er... sure."



Hammond had returned to trying to scrub some of the paint off himself with a scouring spell, unsuccessfully. Every few seconds an 'OW' could be heard from his direction.

Harry approached Clarkson's empty bed. He could see some type of magic warping the curtains into frills. Harry traced his finger across the nearest one, and siphoned off the magic of the spell into his forearm. The lacy frills melted back into the curtain. A second pass lifted all the color-change charms, which in Harry's sight broke apart like plates and dissolved when their magic was removed. His hand was itching a bit, but Harry ignored it, focusing on his task. Harry swept his hand over the curtains on the other side of the bed, canceling the spells on them as well. His arm was buzzing unpleasantly now. Harry ran his other hand briefly over the topmost quilt, yanking all the magic out of it, ending the riot of color spells covering it. That made his other hand buzz too, like holding low voltage electric wires. The bed, however, was back to normal.

"There you go," Harry said, stepping towards the fireplace while shaking his hands. His own bed was untouched, thankfully. His trunk had a big green spot on it, which Harry sort of liked, so he left it.

Hammond looked back to Clarkson's bed, which now appeared perfectly ordinary, an island of normality in a sea of riotous color all around it.

"Outstanding!" Hammond enthused, which caused Steven to lower his book and have a look.

"Way to go, Harry," Steven said. Harry was currently leaning against the hearth with both hands, looking down into the fire with an intense expression on his face.

After a moment, Steven asked "Alright there, Harry?"

Harry took a long slow breath, then stood straight and answered "Yeah, no worries." Harry stretched, and pulled off his jumper. "I do need a shower, through."

"Richie won't be another minute, he's been in there too long already."

Harry went over to his trunk and sat down, pulling off his shoes and socks. He was fishing his toiletries out of the trunk when Clarkson finally stepped out of the shared bath, trailing a large cloud of steam behind him.

"Hamster," he said, "Have you managed to get ANY of that spellwork off my-" he stopped short at the sight of his fully restored bed. He looked at Hammond, who just pointed to subtly to Harry's retreating back as he walked toward the shower.

"Right." Clarkson said. "Well, thanks Harry!"

"Welcome!" was what they heard as the door closed behind Harry.

Clarkson walked over to inspect his bed. Harry had done a first rate job; no leftover frills, no color splotches. What had he DONE, anyway?

Richard looked over to Jeremy, who now had a book open in one hand and was still struggling to cancel his color splotch spell. Served him right, the bugger.

"Oy, Jezza, what did Harry do to cancel this? I tried all afternoon to remove those bloody frills. And he just waved his wand, I suppose?"

"Didn't use his wand, actually," Steven said from behind his book.

"Really?" Hammond asked, looking up from his ninth variation of cleaning spell.

"Nope."

"Huh," said Clarkson. He shrugged. "My hero: the Boy-Who-Cleaned."

The other two broke laughing up at that. Twenty-five minutes later Harry Potter was fast asleep, dreaming of magic.

## CH13: Possibilities and Limitations

-6:43AM, Ravenclaw first year dorms, Boy's side

A squashy something thumped into one half-sleeping Jeremy R. Hammond, who thoroughly ignored it. Six seconds later, another pillow-sized squashy something landed on his head.

"Geroff," Hammond mumbled.

"Up and at 'em, Hamster. Breakfast in ten."

"Right. Thanks ever so much," came his muffled voice from beneath the pillow.

Harry tied his shoes as he watched the byplay. The violent color splotches of the night before had faded to muted circles, leaving the room full of large pastel dots. Harry supposed they'd be gone by tonight. He scooped up a pair of books to return to the tower shelves; his late-night reading. 'A Complete history of Magical Britain' was thorough but dessicatingly dry; putting him to sleep in less than an hour. 'Basics of Spellcraft' was interesting, but lacked serious depth.

"See you at Breakfast then, mates. I'll save you some bacon," Harry offered as he stepped toward the door.

"Cheers, Harry - thanks," Steven's voice replied from inside the jumper he was currently pulling over his head.

Harry got to the bottom of the stairs to see a half-dozen others milling about. Kelly Bloom was holding her book-bag out to Penny, who was spelling it with a long pale wand. Harry walked over.

"Morning Kelly, Penny."

"Hi, Harry," Penny said with a smile.

"Morning," Kelly said quietly, a light blush coloring her cheeks. Her pretty strawberry blonde hair was plated down her back today, Harry noticed.

"Doing magic?" he asked.

"Just a featherweight charm," Penny supplied. "Why break your back lugging books all over the castle?"

"Ah, clever," Harry replied.

Penny grinned even bigger. "Shall I do yours, too?" she asked.

"Please!" Harry said, swinging his book bag off his shoulder and setting it on the table between them.

Penny muttered in Latin and ran her wand down the seam of the bag, then along the strap, and finished with a tap on the strap's buckle to anchor the spell. Harry watched the charm slide over the bag like orange threads of a fishing net weaving themselves into place.

"There, that should do it," Penny said. Harry hefted the bag by the strap experimentally, and it felt as though it were indeed empty, despite the five books inside.

"Nice," Harry commented. "Thanks, Penny."

Penny winked at him. "Everything going alright so far?" she asked.

"Yes, thanks. It's a pretty amazing place. Right now, though, I'm dying for breakfast! I wish the others would shake a leg," Harry patted his stomach and responded with a half-grin. Kelly smirked a bit at that.

Penny grinned back at Harry and said with a lilt in her voice, "Poor Harry, standing around starving and waiting for someone to cook for him!"

Harry rolled his eyes at that, and replied warmly "I can cook just fine, thank you. I'm just waiting on the three stooges to get a move on."

Kelly asked "The what?" at the same time Penny glanced at him and said, "You cook?"

Harry's eyes darted from Penny to Kelly. "Sure, I cook all the time at home."

"Really?" Kelly asked.

"Yup. Breakfast every day for my...uh, relatives. Dinner too, sometimes."

"Huh. I cook at home too, for Dad before he leaves for work," Kelly offered. Her gentle white-and-silver aura sparked a bit in Harry's vision when she mentioned her father.

"I don't mind the cooking, it's the cleaning up I could do without," Harry said. "Scrubbing pots and pans is about my least favorite thing in the world."

"Don't you just spell everything clean?" Penny asked with a tilt of the head.

"Er...no. Underage, and I live with muggles."

Kelly looked him appraisingly, while Penny said "Wow, so you cook for four people every day, Harry? The muggle way?"

"Enough for six, actually, but the three of them eat it all, believe me." Both girl's eyebrows rose at that, and Kelly shot Penny a glance.

"How about you, Kelly?" Harry asked, redirecting the conversation.

She tilted her head and looked back to him. "Just me and dad, mostly. I manage the breakfast, and he cooks dinner."

"Good for you", Harry said with a nod.

"And -I- get to clean with magic," Kelly replied, offering the first bit of sass Harry could ever remember seeing from her. Her blush was gone, too, he noticed.

"Augh...Touché," Harry replied, hand to his chest for comic effect. Kelly smirked at him as Penelope cracked a full smile.

"Morning, All," Lisa Turpin said as she joined them. Hermione and Padma were only a few steps behind.

"Morning Lisa, morning ladies," Harry said to each of them as they approached.

"Harry, where are the boys?" Padma asked.

"Still rolling out of bed, I assume. I suggest we not wait. I'm starving!"

"Same here," Lisa said. "Let's go."

"Penny, you coming?" Harry asked.

"No, I've got to speak to Anthony about rounds. You go ahead. We'll be along shortly. Take care of Harry now, girls!" She added with humor.

"Oy!" Harry exclaimed, while all the girls chuckled or grinned.

"Yes, we'll all be Harry Potter's escorts this morning!" Padma offered with humor.

"As long as it gets us to breakfast. Food. Now!" Lisa said.

Kelly and Padma led the troop down the stairs and over to the Great Hall, with Hermione and Lisa on either side of Harry. Hermione was of a height with Harry, but Lisa was already taller and broader than either of them. They chatted about what they'd heard from their year-mates about their upcoming classes.

The smell of eggs and bacon wafted from the hall as they neared, and Harry's stomach growled in anticipation. The group took over an unused section of the table, and he sat himself between Kelly and Hermione. Padma and Lisa took the other side in order to continue their conversations. That's the sight that greeted Ernie Macmillan and Justin Finch-Fletchly as they entered the Great Hall: Harry Potter surrounded by and conversing with four attractive, intelligent girls. Ernie and Justin both stared a bit as they walked by. Justin glanced at Ernie, then back at Potter.

"How does he do that?" Ernie asked when they arrived at the 'Puffs table.

"Pff. No idea. But the quidditch teams says chicks dig scars," Justin said with a nod, trying to sound wise beyond his eleven years.

"Ah. Pass the jam?"

An hour later saw the Ravenclaw cohort trooping out to greenhouse one. There they found an array of desks at one end, headed by a raised platform supporting a teacher's desk and a hovering blackboard. The air was warm, a bit thick, and pleasantly scented. A trio of large wooden folding screens decorated with images of vines cordoned off the remainder of the greenhouse. The words 'Please Be Seated' were written prominently across the board.

The eight Slytherin first-years had taken over a group of desks in the right rear corner, sitting in close formation with not one open seat between them. 'Clearly a unified front', Harry thought. He felt eyes on him, and sure enough Draco Malfoy was watching him intently. Harry nodded at the blonde, and Malfoy sent a small nod back.

The Ravenclaws spread out in pairs and threes, taking the remaining seats. Harry sat between Padma and Hammond, who was now mostly back to his natural coloring after last night's color-spell battle.

Two minutes later a plump witch of apparent middle age glided around the leftmost screen and ascended the platform. She had not been at the Welcoming Feast, Harry recalled, but had appeared at the faculty table yesterday morning before the start of classes. To Harry's senses her person was surrounded by a shimmering gold and green fog in the silhouette of a rather large bear.

"Good morning, everyone. I am Pomona Sprout, and I shall be your Herbology instructor for the year. I hold masteries in both Herbology and Potions, and I have been teaching here at Hogwarts for twenty-eight years. I look forward to spending the year with you as we learn the basics of Herbology together."

Harry considered her friendly demeanor, warm tone of voice and unassuming physical appearance. 'A bear in sheep's clothing,' he mused. 'Not a woman to get on the bad side of, in any case.' He certainly wouldn't want to face down an angry seven foot bear without a lot of firepower, magical or otherwise.

Sprout explained that their first year Herbology lessons were to consist mainly of lectures relating to plants and their uses, with occasional demonstrations and diversions. Harry found himself

distracted more than once by the glowing bear-shape pacing on the stage, and had to focus on his note-taking to stay with her as she lectured.

Ninety minutes later found them reviewing the various types of magical molds native to Britain, as listed in 'One Thousand Magical Herbs and Fungi', when a male voice chuckled loudly from the Slytherin corner.

Sprout ignored it in favor of asking another question, which Hermione answered from who knew what extracurricular reading. The professor offered another question, which Lisa readily answered.

The amused chuckle came forth again, and another joined in. Malfoy's snicker made itself heard, and Sprout paused in her oration to look at the Slytherin contingent.

What happened next mildly surprised Harry, and thoroughly surprised everyone else. One second Pomona Sprout was standing in front of them frowning, and the next second a very large brown bear was standing before them on four immense paws.

"Gaah!" Hammond yelled from the seat next to Harry.

Padma jumped and exclaimed "Oh, My!" as gasps echoed around the room. The bear rose ponderously up on its hind legs. She was over two meters tall and thickly built, with oversized, muscular shoulders and forelimbs. Her heavy fur gleamed in shades of chestnut and tan. Large black claws protruded from each of her massive paws.

"Oh, my," Padma said again.

The bear's massive head swiveled to glare at the seats in rear of the room. She opened her jaws and roared once - not in full voice, but enough to make her meaning crystal clear. The hair on Harry's neck rose of its own accord.

Harry glanced back over his shoulder to see three sets of very wide eyes from Malfoy and his goons. Malfoy's jaw hung open as he stared at the bear. Goyle appeared to have lost control of at least one bodily function.



Harry's head was still turned, but he felt the flare of magic as the professor reversed her form. He turned back around and tried to hide his grin.

"I'll NOT have any of that FOOLING AROUND in my class, gentlemen. Is that understood?" she said to the Slytherin trio. All three nodded sincerely and rapidly to her.

"Good." Pomona Sprout turned her gaze from them and paused to regard the room at large. "Now, who can tell me the most useful property of the Morgana Chanterelle?"

The remainder of class went uninterrupted, and Sprout gave them a lengthy reading assignment for Thursday on magical roses of the Arctic. The Slytherin boys practically sprinted to the door when she dismissed class, but the girls moved at a more sedate pace.

Harry noticed again the blonde girl with the beautiful sculptured aura that reminded him distinctly of Brancusi's 'Bird in Space'. He must have been staring a bit, because she noticed his glance and made eye contact.

"Something you wanted, Potter?"

"Er... no, sorry," Harry said, ears reddening a bit.

"Do you always write with that muggle toy?" she asked.

Harry's head came up a bit at that; he hadn't known he was being so closely observed. 'Perhaps another pureblood epiphany could be achieved here', Harry thought.

"...Well, yeah. It works much better than a quill."

"Hm." She sounded rather unconvinced.

"Here, try it," Harry said, uncapping the shiny black and gold Sheaffer and handing it to her.

The blonde squinted at him. Her eyes went to the pen in his hand, and her head tilted a bit.

"Is that gold?"

"Just the nib, yeah." Harry wiggled the pen in his hand like a treat.

She drew her lips between her teeth for a moment and regarded him, then lowered her bag onto the nearest desk. She extracted a bit of clean parchment, unrolled it, and held out her hand to him.

Harry reversed his grip on the pen and offered it to her in the correct orientation. She accepted it, adjusted her fingers, and put the pen to parchment. She wrote out "Daphne Greengrass, Hogwarts, September 3rd", in large clean script, then placed a flourish underneath. The blue-black line was smooth, even, and virtually perfect.

"Huh," Daphne said. "That IS better than a quill." She held the pen up to examine it a bit more closely. "It seems well made."

"They are. That one is fairly basic, but they sell a wide range of shapes and colors." Harry thought he'd try to set the hook now. "Some people even buy them as functional jewelry." Her eyes cut to him.

"Really?"

"Oh yes. Precious metals, gemstones, you name it. "

Daphne's eyebrows rose as she pondered that. Harry saw a gleam in her eye.

"They can make quite a statement," he offered.

"About what, exactly?" Daphne asked.

"Oh...wealth, power, the usual. The Queen uses one for official business, you know."

"Really," Daphne said in a slightly disbelieving tone.

"Yep," Harry replied casually, accepting the pen back from her and capping it.

"And what does one pay for the privilege of using such a thing?" She asked, hoisting her bag once more. Harry suspected she was hiding some interest behind a bored tone.

"A basic one like this," Harry said, pocketing the pen, "costs four or five galleons. If you want platinum, maybe fifty galleons. The really fancy ones are priced like real jewelry, I suppose," he said with a shrug. Harry hoisted his bag and gestured towards the door.

Daphne chuckled at him. "Not a big jewelry shopper, Potter?" she said with a small but genuine smile as they left the greenhouse.

"Just the rings for my toes," Harry said. Daphne burst out with a laugh, then covered her mouth demurely with a hand. Harry got a real smile from her, then. He watched a light golden wave ascend through the chrome radiance around her. Daphne snorted lightly and shook her head at him, a smile still dancing in her dark green eyes.

"Thanks for that mental image, Potter," she said.

"I try," he replied, and glanced to her eyes. "And it's just Harry, alright?"

She paused, then nodded. "Harry, then."

As they strolled towards the west tower, Hammond ran by with his hair on fire, literally. His head was engulfed in a haze of blue flames, and he kept shouting 'it wasn't me! it wasn't me!' as he ran. Clarkson was galloping drunkenly behind him with his wand drawn, clack-THUNK-clack-THUNK-clack-THUNK. His left foot was enlarged to at least four times normal size, shoe and all. He was shouting at Hammond to 'get back here!'.

Daphne watched them careen down the hall with a very puzzled look on her face, which Harry noticed. "My roommates," Harry supplied.

"Really?" she asked, her earlier coolness toward him evaporated for the moment. They'd just arrived at the base of a shifting staircase whose top was currently moving from north to west, so they paused there to wait for it.

Harry sighed, "Yep. It keeps things interesting. They are constantly researching charms to try on one another. They're probably a full year ahead of the rest of us in horribly embarrassing magic," he said with a smirk, lowering his bag to the floor.

Daphne rolled her eyes. "At least they're diligent about something," she said.

"Oh, very-You've no idea!" Harry said with a shake of his head.

"Better than our three, then," she said with obvious disapproval.

He met her eyes. "Yeah, so WHAT is UP with them, anyway?" Harry asked, finally getting to ask the question he'd been wanting to float for the last ten minutes.

"They're spoiled little boys with delusions of grandeur, nothing more," Daphne said with some heat. Harry raised an eyebrow at her.

"What?" she asked. "Their parents are rich and politically connected, so they assume they can get away with whatever they like."

Harry grinned. "Didn't look like that today, though, did it?"

Daphne gave him her biggest smile yet. "No, that was amazing! Could you BELIEVE that?" she asked with relish. Harry noticed that her whole face lit up when she smiled, and the energy around her hummed.

"I know, right?" he said back, nodding and grinning, matching her expression.

"I thought they were going to run screaming from the classroom!"

"One could only hope," Harry said, still grinning.

Daphne nodded, still chuckling. She brushed her hair behind one ear and said, "You know, you're rather different from what people say about you."

"Am I?" Harry replied.

Daphne nodded. " You're...normal, mostly."

Harry's eyebrows lifted. How many people had ever called him that, he wondered? Harry met her eyes.

"Daphne, I think that's about the nicest thing anybody's ever said to me," Harry said with a chuckle. Her face froze for a second, then a look of light confusion emerged.

"My life is complicated," Harry offered with a half-grin and a shrug.

"Join the club," she retorted. Part of Harry's brain considered that he was starting to like this one.

The stairwell finally completed its traverse with a quiet thunk. A half-dozen 'Puffs soon trooped by them, including Ernie and Justin, who spotted Harry chatting with the pretty blonde. He elbowed Ernie and nodded in Harry's direction. Ernie followed his glance and spotted Harry. A look of disbelief came over his face, and he looked back to Justin. 'Finch' merely shrugged and said with a smile, "I don't know how he does it, mate." Ernie just snorted and shook his head as they rounded the corner.

Harry hoisted his book bag once more, nodded towards the now aligned steps, and said "Well, this is me."

"Obviously."

"Oh, I've got a catalog from the stationers. Full of fancy pens, if you're interested."

She drew her lips between her teeth for a moment - a habit, Harry suspected, and said, "Maybe."

Harry presumed that actually meant yes. "Think of it as shop-ping," Harry teased, trailing out the last word.

"Prat," Daphne said, rolling her eyes. "Bring it on Thursday."

"As you wish," Harry said, before he could help himself.

"Good."

"Good," he echoed.

"Right. Well, See you then, Pot - Harry."

That got her a half-grin and a nod, as he said "Until then." They parted company, and Harry climbed the long stairways to the third floor. His chat with Daphne had consumed a good portion of the morning break period. It was nearly half-ten, and he needed the loo.

Harry found Charms classroom 2E open and empty at quarter 'till. He scanned the room with some curiosity. The room itself was long and rectangular, with a two-tiered seating platform along each wall. Long benches and desks occupied each tier, running half the length of the room. A massive hearth adorned the north wall. Diffuse light filled the space from the high-arched windows occupying the back wall, framing a raised platform and teacher's podium. Overstuffed bookshelves covered the wall on either side of the door. Everywhere, leather-bound books of all shapes and sizes sat piled and stacked - on various mismatched tables, on the topmost bits of the risers, and even on the teacher's platform. A half-dozen of the books radiated with their own magical auras in Harry's vision. Two freestanding iron candleholders framed the podium, presently unlit. The room was quiet, almost peaceful, with little motes of dust gliding past the windows. Hogwarts hummed at the edge of his perception. Harry took a long breath and exhaled contentedly.

Harry pondered for a minute, then claimed the second seat of the first row as a sort of experiment. He wanted to see who, if anyone, would choose to claim the first seat between him and the podium. He retrieved his notebook and pen, setting them out along with the Charms text. Yawning, he began to idly study the details of the arched ceiling. Without warning, a gruff voice from somewhere over his shoulder said:

"Hello, Harry."

Harry was so thoroughly startled he rose about completely off his chair in surprise. He had been dead certain the room was empty!

Flabbergasted and breathing fast, Harry turned around to peer in the direction from which the voice had come. It sounded fairly close. He scanned the room with a focused glare. Nothing.

"Hello?" he tried.

Nothing. Now both annoyed AND curious, Harry brandished his wand in one hand and looked at it briefly. He mumbled 'useless', then stuffed it back into his robes and fished a prop out of his pocket - a coil of heavy, reinforced wire, a string from Dudley's abandoned bass guitar. It made an effective lash, and whistled menacingly as it cut through the air. It was over a meter long, easily gouged wood, and conducted energy very well. Harry straightened it out gripped it loosely in one hand.

Whoever or whatever it was, they was not making a sound. Nor could Harry see them, which he found very disconcerting. They weren't giving off any magic at all. How did you find something that wasn't there? Harry began to spin the heavy wire around in his hand.

It occurred to Harry with a shudder that whomever it was could level a spell at him at their leisure. He realized he could flee the room, but felt compelled to solve this puzzle. Shoop, shoop, shoop went the wire. 'Think, Potter. It's not emitting any magic, light or sound. What's left?' His mind clicked through possibilities. A minute passed, then two. He rejected the idea to walk the whole room swinging the wire, since whoever it was could simply avoid him. He could blacken the room and hope they stumbled, giving away their location, but then HE wouldn't be able to see either. He could chill the room, possibly, and see if their breath became visible. Harry's eyes gauged the size of the classroom - rather large. That would take considerable time, during which they could simply leave. Maybe...maybe Hedwig could see something he couldn't, or hear, - Hedwig! That's it!

Harry stilled the wire and clenched his other hand into a fist. He willed his blue magic into his hand, building up a charge. Simultaneously, Harry relaxed the dampening on his magical sight until the room got very bright. After ten seconds or so he raised his first and opened it, palm out, releasing what to him was a bright blue pulse of magic. The pulse radiated outward from his outstretched hand in a ring of blue light that flowed across the room, rippling through and over the objects in the room like a sonar wave. Harry was looking for a hole where there shouldn't be one. His eyes darted back and forth across the room.

'Come on, come on, come- there!' he thought. On the upper tier of seats a silhouette was outlined, leaning on the fifth desk. It was fading out as Harry's pulse faded too.

"You," Harry said aloud, pointing directly at the figure. "Show yourself."

Harry heard something faint, maybe a soft chuckle. A bright white flash of magic caused him to flinch and clamp back down on his visual abilities. Through the glare, Harry saw none other than his own head of house fade into view. The Charms Master was smiling broadly at him. Flitwick said "Hello, Harry. I believe I managed to surprise you, no?"

Harry's shoulders slumped as his head fell forward. He closed his eyes and shook his head, sighed mightily, then said, "Hello, Sir. Yes-yes you did."

Flitwick actually clapped his hands together and rubbed them with joy. Harry stared a bit crossly at man enjoying his victory.

"Sir, I didn't see anyone when I entered the room. Were you here the whole time?"

"Indeed I was, Harry," Flitwick said with obvious relish. Harry took that in for a moment.

"But...how?"

Flitwick looked very proud of himself. "There are three known spells that can fool the Eye of Vance, Harry. Evidently this one also evades your magical sight."

"Three? I didn't know that," Harry said honestly.

"Good, then I'll have something to teach you!" Flitwick said with humor.

"Yes, sir," Harry said a bit flatly.

"Don't be too discouraged, Harry. That's why I'm a Professor," Flitwick replied amiably.



"Right," Harry said with a nod. "I mean, yes sir," he corrected himself.

Harry retook his seat, the coiled wire safely back in his pocket. Flitwick had clearly seen it, but chose to ignore it.

After a moment of battling his curiosity, Harry said "Sir, is there any chance of my learning that spell?"

"Possibly," Flitwick replied, causing Harry's eyes light up. "...If you spoke Gobbledegook," he added dryly.

"Oh," Harry replied, deflating. His head tilted a bit in thought, and then he said quietly "Well, I might be interested in that, actually. Sir."

Surprised, Flitwick froze mid-step and looked at him.

"Really."

Harry met his eyes. "Yes, sir. I believe I have an...affinity for non-wanded magic. I understand that's how the Goblins work most of their magic. So any serious study of Goblin magics," -Flitwick's eyebrows rose, "...or certain careers," -Flitwick nodded at him, "...would benefit from a proficiency in Gobbledegook."

Flitwick took a long breath and studied the young man. Finally he said "That's very logical, Harry; well reasoned. But learning a non-human language is quite an undertaking. Believe me, I know."

Harry nodded, maintaining eye contact.

"You're serious, then?"

"Yes, sir."

"Do you have any idea how rare Goblin scholars are?"

"Exceedingly so, I gather."

"Indeed." Flitwick paused to rub his chin, glancing at the ceiling as he thought. After a moment his eyes slid to Harry, and he said "Hypothetically, it WOULD be easier if you started early." Harry grinned. Their conversation was interrupted briefly by a chatting Padma and Lisa coming through the door.

Flitwick leaned in and said quietly, "Let me think on it some more, and we'll discuss it later, alright?"

"Yes, sir. Thanks."

He nodded to Harry, and turned to make his way around the piles of books and over to the podium.

Ravenclaw shared this class with the Gryffindor. Harry watched as his own cohort arrived first, minus Hammond and Clarkson, who were presumably busy trying to return themselves to normal. Lisa and Padma were sitting together, still chatting animatedly about something. Steven glided up and took the seat to Harry's left, leaving the right one still open.

The first two Gryffindors arrived, Ron Weasley and another boy with an pronounced Irish accent whom Harry had not previously met. They seated themselves in the lowermost tier across from Harry. Ron waved, which Harry returned with a nod. Hermione and Kelly arrived next, taking the seats directly behind Steven and him. The test seat still remained open, poised between Harry and the teacher's platform.

The four Gryffindor girls arrived presently, taking seats on the opposite wall. The Indian girl on the end was obviously Padma's twin, Parvati; her poise and posture mirrored those of her sister. Even their auras looked alike to Harry, both composed of parallel golden ribbons that rotated slowly around each girl. Parvati's ribbons were interspaced with blue threads, Harry observed, whereas her sister's were not.

Harry's attention was diverted by the arrival of Hammond, fully extinguished and looking fine. He got a thumbs-up from Steven and Harry as he climbed past into the upper tier.

Harry recognized Dean Thomas as he entered and claimed a seat next to Ron. A distinct 'clack-THUNK, clack-THUNK' announced the approach of one Richard J. Clarkson. Harry shook his head, grinning, as the boy made his way awkwardly into the room. Everyone eyed his massive left foot with awe, and the chuckles started before he got halfway across the room. He bypassed the desks altogether and approached the teaching platform, where Flitwick had his head

buried in a huge red book. He cleared his throat, catching the Charms Master's attention.

"Problem, Mister Clarkson?" Flitwick asked, looking up. Richard lifted his hoof clear of the edge of the platform so Flitwick could see the oversized foot and shoe.

"Ah." Flitwick brandished his wand and swished it at the foot. The oversized shoelaces, which had been hanging loose, tied themselves in a perfect bow knot.

"There you go, son," Flitwick said with a straight face, and glanced back down at his book to hide a grin. Harry was really starting to like the man's sense of humor. Hammond guffawed from the upper seats.

Clarkson, meanwhile, had a profoundly confused look on his face. He sighed, put his hoof back down on the floor, and said a little flatly, "thank you, sir." He turned and began to shuffle asymmetrically back towards the student desks. After three or four clack-THUNKs, Flitwick looked up and shot a pink spell at Clarkson's retreating form. The hoof rapidly shrunk back to normal, shoe and all. The boy looked down, hiked up his pant leg, wiggled his foot, and then exclaimed "Thank MERLIN!"

This elicited a round of laughter from the class. Richard blushed bit, then turned and jogged happily up to sit beside Hammond. Neville Longbottom had entered during the show, and was now looking for a place to sit. He saw Harry Potter laughing along with everyone else, and an empty seat just beside him. 'Gryffindors forward', he told himself, and stepped quickly over toward Harry.

"Hi, Harry. Mind if I sit there?" he asked a bit nervously with a nod toward the first spot.

Harry grinned at him, and said "Nope. Have at it!"

Neville's features relaxed into a small grin. He scooted around the end of the desk and dropped into the first seat, glad to have not been late. He dug his wand out his robe pocket and laid it on the desk, followed by their text, a quill, ink and parchment. He glanced left and did a double-take to verify what he saw. Harry had a skinny black book open in front of him. The pages were divided in little blue

squares, but otherwise blank but for a date neatly printed at the top. Harry held a... pen, he thought they were called, in his right hand, poised over the page but not dripping as a quill was prone to do. Harry wrote out a line in a short, compact script on the left page, then another on the opposite page. Curious, Neville leaned over to peer more closely at the notebook pages. Harry noticed his proximity and his glance.

"I have a system for notes," Harry said with a little nod. The brilliant green eyes locked on his. The intensity and intelligence Neville saw there caught him a bit off guard, even with the smile in the glance.

"Oh. Right," Neville replied, hoping that would be sufficient. Harry nodded and turned his attention back to the notebook. Neville was just uncapping his inkwell when the professor's voice called the class to order.

"Alright, everyone, quiet please." Flitwick had climbed a small library step in order to stand appropriately behind the lectern.

"Welcome, everyone, to first-year Charms. I am Filius Flitwick, your instructor and Charms Master here at Hogwarts. Together we shall be studying the most widely used form of magic in the world today, namely Charms. Charms are truly the bread-and-butter of the magical world. We charm our brooms to fly, our faucets to flow, our lamps to light, and our roofs not to leak. Charms cook for us, clean for us, and keep us safe. They warm us, cool us, clothe us, preserve our food, and can even save our lives. Indeed, Charms are the foundation of our magical world."

Harry thought he was selling it a bit strong, but it was a good speech nonetheless. Flitwick had certainly captured the attention of most of the class.

Harry wrote 'charms=good' in his notebook.

After calling the attendance role, Flitwick descended to the main floor of the room so walk around and make eye contact with the students. He winked at Harry as he passed.

"Alright, who can name the two main categories of charms?" Flitwick asked in a raised voice. Surveying the raised hands, he said "...Miss Patil?"

"Applied and maintained, sir."

"Very good, two points to Ravenclaw, Miss Patil," Flitwick said with pleasure.

"For five points, what's the difference between the two?" Flitwick asked the room. Hermione's hand was up, as were Padma's and Lisa's. The boy beside Ron also had his hand up. Flitwick glanced at him.

"Mister Finnegan?"

In a rolling Irish accent, Seamus answered " The Applied ones ye do once, sir, and they stay put. The maintained ones, you've got to keep the spell goin' or they quit."

"Good enough, young man. Five points to Gryffindor."

Seamus and Ron shared a grin. Flitwick proceeded to explain that Applied charms were indeed spelled once, and persisted for as long as the spell retained its magic. This duration could be extended almost indefinitely -Harry's eyebrows rose at this- by tying the charm to a source of magical power, such as a rune, or having the charm absorb ambient magic from its surroundings.

"In fact, that's how many of the charms within Hogwarts function. They draw ambient magic from the castle to continue working," Flitwick explained. "Many of the charmed objects you see every day - the stairs, the portraits, and the faucets, for example - were charmed hundreds of years ago, and the ambient magic of the castle keeps them functioning."

Harry was writing quickly, now, recording the key points of Flitwick's lecture on the left page, and filling the right with ideas: 'ambient magic - drain?', 'life expectancy of charm in non-magical location?', 'portable/self regenerating power source -runes? -solar? -atomic?'. Flitwick's voice caught his attention.

"Very well, time for a demonstration." From the pocket of his jacket Flitwick produced a pink rubber ball and held it up for the class' inspection. He bounced the ball twice, then held it out between two fingers. Harry idly wondered where Flitwick got a muggle-made rubber ball.

"Now, if I were to charm this ball blue," he said, touching his wand to the ball, which promptly turned blue, "...that would be an applied charm. If I were to hover the ball, however," Flitwick said as he trained his wand on it with one hand, and released the ball with the other, "...that would be a maintained charm, " Flitwick explained, as the ball floated lazily in the air.

"Naturally, the two can be used together," he said, and twisted his wand at the ball. It promptly grew to ten times its original size. Flitwick turned his wand the other way slightly and the now rather large ball suddenly had bright yellow animated stars and red comets flying across its surface. Appreciative noises echoed around the room. Harry noted that the Charms Master had done that with the briefest of gestures and no incantation. With a wave of the wrist, Flitwick bounced the now pumpkins-sized ball against the floor twice, producing a loud THWACK, THWACK. Chuckles went around the room.

"Now, if I stop performing the hover charm," he said, lifting his wand. The ball fell to the floor, bounced once and dribbled to a stop in front of Ron. "...the maintained spell ends immediately, whereas the applied charms for size and color are still in affect." Several nods went around the room. Flitwick waved a silent cancellation at the ball, which promptly shrunk to its former small pink self. He made a towing motion with his wand, and the ball sailed into his outstretched hand. He put the ball down on Seamus' desk as he walked by, a gift.

"Questions so far, anyone?"

Harry had four pages of notes far, and about two hundred questions, thank you very much.

"No? Alright then, let's try some magic, shall we?" Flitwick said, rubbing his hands together with childlike glee.

The energy level of the class ratcheted up a notch as several excited whispers ran throughout the room. Flitwick hovered a box off the top of the bookshelf nearest the door, and guided it across the room to stop at his feet. Another wave and the top floated off the box. Another gesture from the wand, and a stream of white feathers floated up to hover in front of the Professor in loose formation. That caught Harry's attention, and he stopped to watch. 'How did he... he

didn't charm them individually... he didn't say anything, actually...huh."

Flitwick waved the wand to his right and eight feathers floated off the occupied student desks there, where they drifted to a stop and floated down to each desk with downy grace. He repeated the gesture to his left, and eight more feathers sought out the appropriate desks, then ceased hovering and floated down to rest.

'Wait,' Harry thought, 'he just steered eight of them simultaneously, while hovering the rest...how does THAT work? Is that different magic, or more will, or both? Aughh!'

The right side of Harry's notebook had run over to its fifth page now. Analyzing magic was maddening, sometimes.

His own feather came to rest in front of him, drawing Harry out of his spinning thoughts. He picked up the feather, feeling its texture. It was soft and clean, but it had no radiance to it; its former owner was deceased, Harry concluded.

"Now then, first an applied charm. The incantation is 'Caeruleus', and the gesture is like so," Flitwick said, making a simple vee motion with his wand. He demonstrated the charm, which turned another feather to a deep blue color. "Please try it now. On the feather ONLY, please," he added, glancing at Hammond and Clarkson as he did so. Harry grinned.

Eight or nine voices rang out almost immediately with cries of 'Caeruleus!'. Five feathers changed immediately. Harry heard others mangling the latin, incanting various incorrect pronunciations.

With some trepidation, Harry lifted his own wand from the desk and aimed it at the feather. In his normal speaking voice, Harry incanted 'Caeruleus' with the appropriate gesture. The feather turned a very light sky blue. Harry glanced at it, then at Neville, who had a midnight blue feather sitting before him. Not entirely sure what he did wrong, but determined to do better, Harry focused again on his feather. He gathered a good deal of his own blue magic into his hand, and let it flow down into the wand, which sang back to him like always. He incanted strongly 'Caeruleus!' and shoved his magic through the wand at the feather. Harry saw a sky blue field envelop the feather, which began to darken steadily to a strong medium blue. Mentally, Harry sighed with relief.

"Well done, Harry," Neville said from his left. Harry gave him a grin and a nod.

"You too, Neville. Look at us, we're wizards!" Harry joked. Neville gave him a relieved smile.

Flitwick's voice rose above the din of enthusiastic casters. "Very good, very good; those of you who've managed it, you may reverse the charm with the incantation 'finite'. Please do so, and repeat the Caeruleus charm once more. Those of you who need help, raise your wands."

Harry touched his blue feather with a fingertip, curious to see what that magic felt like before he cancelled it. The feather felt different now, slightly radiant to his perception, with a faint magical signature around it composed of his own sky blue magic. As directed, Harry performed the 'finite' and watched the magic around the feather...evaporate. It broke apart and drifted away, the individual motes of light fading and going out. It felt sort of wasteful to Harry, throwing away magic like that. He wondered if magic was conserved somehow like energy, or momentum. More lines appeared in the notebook.

Harry tried the Caeruleus charm again, and found that it required a bit more effort this time. Apparently charms were magically expensive, Harry observed. For his second cancellation, Harry touched the wand to the feather and easily drew the magic back off of it into the wand. A split-second mental image of a pure blue field flashed through his mind, there-and-gone. 'That would be the `will of the caster`, then, Harry mused. 'At least I didn't lose the magic to the surroundings that time.'

Flitwick had them practice for the next five minutes or so, during which time Harry charmed the feather twice more, repeating his experiment. When he cancelled the spell, the magic was lost to him. When he re-absorbed it, the next spell came easier. That seemed to make sense; if you threw it away, you had to make more, whereas if you took it back, you could re-use it over again. Harry's notes had consumed nearly eight pages by now. Curious, Harry glanced left. Neville had been canceling and re-spelling his feather -what, twenty times by now? Harry leaned over a bit.



"Say Neville, looking good!"

"Yup, I got this one down, I think," Neville said. He charmed his feather once more as Harry watched.

"You must have changed that twenty times by now," Harry said with a smirk.

"Twenty-two, actually," Neville replied.

"Wow. So does casting the spell feel any different now, after all those charms?" Harry asked, paying close attention for the answer.

"Not really...although I suppose it gets a bit easier with repetition, you know?" Neville said, looking at Harry.

Harry pondered that answer. "...Right. Sure, Neville," he said with an enthusiasm he did not feel. "Hey, charm mine once?" Harry asked, holding his feather out to Neville. Neville glanced at him, then lifted his wand and performed the spell. Harry's feather turned a deep midnight blue, just like Neville's.

"Wow, you do have this one down!" Harry said with a laugh. "Thanks, Neville."

"No problem, Harry." Neville picked up his own feather once more, running his fingers through it appreciatively.

Meanwhile, Harry had his feather in front of him, glowing with Neville's magic. To Harry's eyes, the feather had a gold-flecked red haze over it now, strong and heavy, the same color magic he saw spinning in and around Neville. Harry found himself irrationally jealous of the strength of Neville's charm. He doubted he could even execute the charm twenty-two times.

Curious, Harry touched his finger to feather. It felt energized, magical. Harry was fairly certain he could pull the magic off of it and move it through himself, grounding it out. But, he wondered, could he recycle this magic? He pulled a bit of the red magic off into his hand and lifted it away from the feather, which lighted a few shades to a rich sapphire color. Harry barely noticed the feather, though, as he was staring at his hand. The red magic sat stubbornly in his palm, sluggish to move when he asked it to. Harry willed his own magic to

surround it, as he'd done before with Hogwarts' magic. His blue field surrounded the red. Harry asked the blue motes to unwind the red magic into threads, which took a few seconds. The red threads became strings, then mere gleams as they broke down into raw magic once again and sank into his palm.

'So that worked,' thought Harry, 'but it's quite slow, and requires rather a lot of mental focus. Speed and focus need improvement. Speed and focus... speed and focus...' he mused. Harry glanced at his wand lying on the desk. 'A magical focus, perhaps? Could it be that obvious?'

Harry lifted his wand and touched it to the feather. He pulled at the magic on the feather through the wand, as he'd done when recycling his own magic. The red magic climbed readily into the wand, practically effortless. As the magic moved down the length of the wand, the song from the wand changed, like a different chord played on the same instruments. The phoenix note in particular was strong. By the time the pulse of magic reached the wand grip, it had bleached out to a pure silver light that sank readily into Harry's hand with a tingling feeling.

'It worked!' Harry thought. 'The wand conducts...uh...magic.' His inner critic thought 'Well yes - obviously, you idiot. It's a magic wand!' Harry shook his head to stop himself arguing with himself, and wrote out 'wand as magical conductor, pull/push' in his notebook. The feather sat before him now, snow white once more. Flitwick's voice pulled him out of his thoughts.

"...class, now that we have mastered the *Caeruleus*, let's try the hover charm, shall we?" Across the room, Ron Weasley brandished his wand with a gleam in his eye. Steven was grinning again in the chair to Harry's right.

"Yes, yes, here we go, alright?" Flitwick said. "Use this gesture," he said, demonstrating the famous swish-and-flick three or four times. "Your incantation is '*Wingardium Leviosa*'; note the stress on the second and seventh syllables." Flitwick had them all say it together three times as he 'conducted' with his wand.

"Alright, give it a go," he instructed. Harry heard and felt the gentle heat from Hermione's spell as her feather floated out over his head toward the center of the room. A silver cloud enveloped the feather,

with a long tether resembling a fishing pole leading back over his head, presumably to Hermione's wand.

"Ah, Well done Miss Granger, well done. Five points to Ravenclaw for the first successful hover charm," Flitwick announced. Harry was fairly certain Hermione was beaming at something right now, probably Flitwick. Her feather continued to float upwards, doing little loops now through the arched rafters. 'Show off,' Harry smirked.

Harry lifted his own wand and regarded his feather. If his hunch was right, this was going to be rather disappointing. 'I suppose it's better to know, than not know,' he reasoned. Harry rehearsed the incantation in his head, listening to Steven try and succeed on his right. 'Right; here goes nothing,' Harry thought.

Harry pushed a portion of magic into his wand, gestured and incanted 'Wingardium Leviosa!'. A pale blue beam of light left the wand and surrounded the feather. It quivered a bit, then rose slowly from the desk in a wobbling hover a few inches in the air. 'That's not completely awful, then,' Harry thought. He pushed what seemed like a lot more pure magic at the feather, and the pale blue light got brighter. The feather stabilized and floated peacefully about a foot off the desk now. 'That's decent,' Harry thought, 'although it feels like I'm pushing Dudley through a straw.' He held the spell for another ten seconds, and was rewarded with a sheen of sweat on his brow from the effort. He faintly heard Steven say 'Good job' as he focused on letting the feather back down to the desk. Nearly panting with effort, Harry looked over to Steven to reply.

"Thanks, mate, I wasn't-" Harry cut himself off at the sight of Steven hovering his feather easily, conducting it in diving figure eights with no apparent effort. Inwardly, Harry groaned. He felt drained, and weak. He propped his chin on his hand. 'I'm obviously too short on power,' he thought. 'I can do the spell, I just don't have the juice to make it work properly.' His lips twitched sideways as he thought it through. 'What DO you do when a small battery's not enough?' Harry considered. 'Obviously, you hook up a bigger battery,' part of his brain answered. 'Or plug it in. Or maybe...you recharge it,' Harry thought. He glanced left and right; feathers were soaring everywhere, and people were shouting incantations and laughing.

Harry lowered the tip of his wand carefully down beside his chair, next to his bookbag, until the tip came to rest against the floor.

Hogwarts' song got a bit clearer in the back of his mind. 'Here goes nothing, again,' Harry thought. He began to pull gently on the magic in the floor, leery of repeating his first experience tapping into Hogwarts' magic. With the intermediary of the wand, though, there wasn't any heat or clashing noise filling his head, just the phoenix song of his wand. He felt the same warm silver magic flow into his hand, slow and even. It folded under his own blue magic with hardly any effort. Harry Potter was plugged in.

Harry increased the pull very slightly, wary of feedback or magical backlash. His wand got warm in his hand, and the phoenix note got a bit louder in his head, but that was all. Harry drew in magic for a good minute and a half, watching as his own blue-turquoise aura got brighter and bluer, with an undercurrent of silver. He had the sensation of breathing crisp mountain air. He even FELT better, Harry noticed, as the magic flowed in his system.

Another minute went by, then Harry slowly lifted his wand away from the floor. He felt more...something... than he had in a long while. Nothing hurt, exactly, but he felt a bit...hyper. Something else was pulsing along with his heartbeat.

'In for a penny,' Harry told himself. He aimed his wand at the innocent feather, quietly incanted *'wingardium leviosa'*, and let the magic flow. A thick, diffuse blue-and-silver cloud settled over the feather. For about a second or so, nothing appeared to happen, which confused Harry. Then he noticed the feather was actually rising slowly, except...it wasn't. The desk was rising, and lifting the feather with it. The seven meter oak desk was floating three inches off the ground, in a perfect hover. Neville had raised both hands away from the desktop, looking at it confusedly. He looked to Harry, and his eyes went very wide. Across the room, Ron Weasley was goggling at him too. Steven chose that moment to lean over and say with quiet humor,

"Put the room down, Harry. And quit showing off."

"er...Right. Sorry 'bout that, Steve, Neville." Harry lowered his wand slowly, and the desk came silently back to rest.

Neville whistled quietly. "Merlin, Harry."

Harry looked at him, not really knowing what to say; he just shrugged instead.

Flitwick's voice cut over through the chaos. "Very nice, everyone, well done. Keep trying. Those of you who haven't gotten it yet, check your pronunciation, please." He let them try for two minutes more, then called a halt to the casting. The Charms Master went on to explain the drying charm, and then the feather-light charm, which all of the students greatly appreciated. He concluded the lecture with the scouring charm, and assigned two chapters of readings for their next class, plus one hour of practice on the charms learned today. Harry had filled another two pages with class notes, and three with his own theories, ideas and questions. He'd had to refill his pen twice in just this class alone.

"Ready for lunch, Harry?" Neville asked as they packed up.

"Definitely. Shall we walk down together?" Harry replied.

Neville seemed a bit taken aback, but answered "Sure!"

Hermione caught up to them near the door, feather clutched in her hand.

"Hi Harry, Neville. Wasn't that just the best?" she enthused as they made their way into the hall.

"It was brilliant!," Neville replied with equal enthusiasm. They both looked to Harry for his verdict.

"It was a real eye-opener," Harry said with a nod. His companions took that to be a positive review, and the discussion was off and running from there. Ten minutes later found them entering the Great Hall, where Neville trotted off with a wave to join Ron and Seamus.

Harry and Hermione were sitting side by side in an open section of the Ravenclaw table, just pouring the pumpkin juice, when a young looking dark-haired boy glided up and sat down across from them. Hermione paused in conversation to look at the unfamiliar boy. He was a first-year Hufflepuff, apparently, with a square-jawed face set in a small grin, straight black hair parted to the side, and bright blue eyes. Maybe she'd just missed him in their common classes so far,

Hermione supposed. She glanced at Harry to if he knew the boy across from them, and promptly got confused.

Harry, she observed, was grinning at the boy as if they were old friends, which Hermione thought was highly unlikely, given Harry's recent introduction to the wizarding world. His next words REALLY confused her, through.

"I liked you better the other way," Harry said with a playful smirk to the boy.

The boy put on a face, and said "Who told?"

"No one told," Harry countered. "I can just tell."

Clearly they knew each other, Hermione reasoned. In fact, there was some subtext going on, but piffle if she knew what it meant. Who WAS this boy, anyway?

"Still got the jacket?" Harry asked with a grin.

"Oh yeah," the boy said. "Like what you saw, did you?"

Harry grinned at him and said "Yup! The pink hair was awesome."

Hermione was well past confused, now. This boy was practically ...flirting!... with Harry. And not only was he -enjoying- it, he was flirting back. Was Harry attracted to him? Was Harry gay, she wondered? Did he even know it? And who WAS this boy, anyway? Hermione was so entangled in her thoughts that she missed Harry nod sideways toward her.

"This is my friend Hermione. Hermione, meet Mis-"

"DON'T say it!" the boy warned. Hermione glanced at him just in time to see his features blur and go soft, his body growing larger. The black hair erupted into shocking pink, the cheekbones rose, his nose shrank. His neck and shoulders became less thick, finer, more feminine. His chest expanded into...oh my! Hermione's brain froze for a second as all her speeding thoughts became a ten-car pileup.

"...Tonks," Harry finished. Across from them now sat a teenage girl, well endowed, with spiky pink hair and brown eyes. Hermione was

speechless, gaping at the girl. She glanced over to Harry, then back at the girl, her mouth still agape.

"I think you broke her, Tonks," Harry joked. Tonks grinned.

"She'll be alright. Won't you, love?" Tonks said.

"Uh...Sure. I'm fine," Hermione replied, missing the wink Harry sent to Tonks.

"Hermione," Harry said, touching her shoulder and drawing her glance to him. "Are you sure you're okay? Not hallucinating or anything?"

Holding his gaze, Hermione said "No, I'm fine, Harry, but -she!-he!-" Harry's eyes turned from hers back across the table, and Hermione's eyes followed.

"Gaah!" Hermione started. Sitting across the table from them, was her! A twin Hermione sat across from them, looking back at her with a knowing grin and a wink. Harry broke out laughing, gasping for breath. 'Wow, he's got a nice laugh!' both Hermiones thought.

After five or six seconds, Harry calmed down enough to say "Oh, Tonks, that was PRICELESS!". Hermione tilted her head at herself across the table, smiling back at her. Me. Whatever.

"Figured it out yet?" asked the other her with a teasing, confident smile that looked out of place on her face.

Hermione Granger was indeed figuring it out. "Well...you were three people in the last thirty seconds. You didn't wave a wand. You didn't drink a potion. You didn't use any magical artifacts that we could see, so..." The other her's eyebrows had climbed high. Is that what she looked like when she did that, part of Hermione's brain wondered? Were her teeth really that big? Is that how she sounded to other people? "...so you must be some sort of shape-shifter," Hermione concluded. Harry turned to her, his own eyebrows raised.

"Wow-well done, Hermione. I never would have sussed it out that fast," Harry said. Hermione, the real one, blushed faintly. A shimmer of pink drew her attention, and she watched the larger girl's form reappear from her own.

"You really ARE a Ravenclaw, aren't you?" the girl asked, impressed.

"Yes, she is," Harry said with a vigorous nod.

"Hermione Granger," she said, offering her hand to the girl. The girl shook it and reintroduced herself as 'Tonks - just Tonks.'

"I guess you're a seventh-year?" Hermione asked. Tonks nodded.

Hermione served herself a bit a chicken, then said "May I ask, is that your real appearance?" Hermione gestured across the table to Tonks' spiky bubblegum-pink hair, button nose and currently bright blue eyes.

"Ha! Are you kidding? What fun would that be?" Tonks asked, growing a large bushy mustache to illustrate her point. Harry chuckled.

Harry swallowed a bite, then said "We met a few weeks ago, in London," gesturing between himself and Tonks. "Before I got my letter, even." A part of Hermione's brain was suddenly rather irrationally jealous of Tonks.

"Really?" Hermione asked.

"Yep. Came out of a shop and there she was, waiting for a traffic signal." To Tonks, Harry said "I presume you recognized me?"

Tonks nodded. "Yes. Who'd of thought I'd meet Harry Potter walking down a street in Surrey?" she said with a shake of the head.

"Have you always been a shapeshifter?" Hermione asked.

"Metamorphmagus," Tonks clarified, "...and no. It started around age three for me." She rolled a shoulder in a shrug.

"Meta-morph-magus," Hermione said, committing the word to memory. "huh."

"That's me," Tonks confirmed.



"I think it would be great to look like someone else - When you wanted to," Harry said. Hermione shot him a sympathetic glance.

Tonks reached across the table and patted his hand. "Don't worry, Harry," She said in a tone of humorous, overdone sympathy. There are scads of charms to change your appearance for a bit. I'll be glad to show you a few, if you like," She added with a flirty wink.

Harry had never had a girl, an -older- girl, a -beautiful- girl, flirt with him that way before. Her words and tone of voice sparked equal parts trepidation and curiosity in Harry. He felt his ears go red . "Uh...yeah...I mean, yes, that would be great, Thank you," he stammered.

Hermione was, to say the least, surprised at Harry's behavior. He was practically stuttering at the older girl. She was MUCH too old to be flirting with Harry, the puritanical voice in Hermione's brain huffed. 'WHAT did she think she was doing, anyway? He's ELEVEN. A frightfully precocious eleven, granted, but still eleven.' The little part of her brain that was irrationally jealous of Tonks joined in with the puritanical part, and the part that thought it was against the rules - surely there must a rule somewhere!- joined in too. The crafty part of her brain piled on, and a plan took shape in her brilliant, crowded brain.

A second or three later, Hermione took a sip of her perfectly delicious pumpkin juice, and made a face at it as if it smelled like a sweaty towel. Tonks noticed as Hermione had intended, and asked "Something wrong, Hermione?"

Hermione pulled a face and said "It's warm." She put the glass down and slid it to her right. "Would you mind, Harry?" Harry lifted a single eyebrow at her, then extended a fingertip to the glass. He pulled a measure of heat from the glass and its contents until the glass frosted over. Hermione slid the glass back over next to her plate, saying "Thanks, Harry," with a smile. Oblivious to the byplay, Harry nodded back while slicing off another bit of chicken. Hermione lifted the now frosty glass and took a careful sip, studying Tonks as she did so. Tonks' eyes were wider than normal, tracking frosted glass in her hand. Silently, Tonks mouthed the words 'Did he--' to her. Hermione nodded to her with a bump of the eyebrows and small, victorious smile. Harry did HER favors at the asking; take THAT,

miss buxom seventeen-year-old shapeshifter. She'd let the girl jump to her own conclusions about how Harry did what he did.

Tonks leaned back a bit, and studied the two across from her. They were something else, the two of them. Clearly the girl was protective of Harry... which was okay, Tonks realized. Although it didn't really look like Harry needed a protector, if he could do simple wandless magic already.

A group of approaching first-years drew her attention; the twin Indian girls were approaching the table, followed by two others she didn't recognize. Time to go find her boyfriend, she decided, and get a bite before lunch ended.

"Looks like your friends are here," Tonks commented, causing Harry and Hermione to look towards the approaching group. "I'm off, then. Ta!" She said, and extricated herself from the bench to stand. Hermione looked pleased, and Harry confused.

"You don't have to go, Tonks," he offered.

'Sweet, oblivious boy,' she thought. "No, thanks anyway. I'm off to find Cedric and have a nosh before class." She gave them a wave and a cheery grin. Harry smiled back; Hermione just smiled.

"Enjoy your lunch!" she said to the four new arrivals as she stepped away towards the 'Puff table. Jeremy and Steve watched her go, while the Patil twins seated themselves in her vacated spot across from Harry and Hermione. Steven eventually sat down next to Padma, while Hammond trotted around to park next to Harry. New plates and silverware sparkled in to being in front of each of them as they sat.

"H'lo, everyone," Harry said. Hermione, who was taking a drink, just waved.

"Hi, Harry!" the patil twins answered in unison, causing Harry's fork to pause halfway to his mouth, before continuing. Harry winked at them, amused.

Steven grinned and shook his head. "They're always doing that when they're together, " he supplied as he poured himself a juice.

"Are not!" came the synchronous reply from the girls, causing a round of chuckles.

"Hey, where's Richard?" Harry asked.

"Stayed after with Flitwick," Hammond supplied. Harry nodded.

"What did you do to his foot, anyway?" Harry asked mirthfully. All eyes turned to Hammond for the answer.

"Enlargement charm, 'course. The Russian version", Hammond replied. "Much harder to cancel," he clarified with a devious grin. The girls rolled their eyes; Steven shook his head; Harry chuckled again.

"That's rather immature," Padma said with a grin. Clearly she'd enjoyed it.

Hammond shrugged. "Well, yeah, for now. But good pranks take research. I've learned over forty new spells already, just keeping up with Richie. How many have YOU learned?" Jeremy countered, taking a sip of juice.

Padma's eyebrows rose, while her sister's identical jaw dropped. "Nine," she answered a bit abashedly.

"Well, there you go, then," Hammond said, sounding justified.

"So Harry," Steven said a moment later, "...who's your friend ?" he asked with a tip of the head toward the 'Puffs table.

"Hm? Oh, that's Tonks," Harry replied, as if that explained it all.

"Don't say her first name, whatever you do," Parvati said to the table at large. "She hates it. Hexed a boy into the infirmary yesterday for using it." A flock of eyebrows rose at that.

"So, what IS her first name, anyway?" Hermione asked.

Parvati made to reply, but then stopped and said instead "Maybe it's best you don't know. You can't say it accidentally, then." Harry and Hammond nodded at the wisdom of that. Hermione merely squinted a bit. She didn't like being told she wasn't fit to know something.

Harry noticed her expression and bumped his shoulder into hers in their familiar way. Her eyes cut towards him. "Let it go," Harry said quietly. The squint remained for a moment more, then a little nod. She'd let it go, for now. But the library had a student registry...

A cough and a choke came from the end of the group, past Harry. Hammond sputtered as Harry slapped his back. "Alright there, mate?" Harry asked.

Hammond nodded and took a swig of juice, his face returning to normal color.

"Don't breathe the solids, Jezza," Steven chastised from the other end with a smile. Padma elbowed him lightly in the ribs, which Harry saw. When had they gotten that friendly, he wondered?

"Cheers, Stevie," Richard said, hoisting his glass towards him.

Lunch wound down. Harry chose to visit the Gryffindor table for a bit to chat with the Weasley twins, Neville and Ron. Hermione slid down the table to where Penny and Anthony sat, books open in front of them as they argued about the correct interpretation of a runic sequence used by the Vikings to power their boats without wind.

Apparently his little faux pas in Charms had been the topic of some discussion.

"Our little brother tells us you've got a career as a furniture mover, Harry," George teased with a grin. Harry blinked and shook his head.

He looked back to George and shrugged one shoulder. "I might have overdone it a bit." Fred and George both grinned at that. Harry supposed they'd overdone a thing or three in their academic careers.

"So guys...If one wanted to hypothetically set a time-delayed prank, how could that be accomplished?" Harry asked with a matching grin. The twin's smiles got wider. Ron just groaned. Neville's eyebrows climbed high, but he leaned in.

"Step into our office, young Harry," Fred said. The four put their heads together and animated whispering soon emanated from the huddle.

/AN: Thanks for reviewing; it keeps the motivation high. Regarding the story: I'm an amateur, writing this story as an escape. It's my Alternate Universe. I am taking liberties with the C-list characters as I see fit. I revamped the schedules because it's my A.U. The first few days will be in mostly linear time to establish things, moving to intervals thereafter. This will not be an easy super-Harry story; rather more of an 'occasionally amazing but always different' Harry story. He has limitations and blind spots, many of which haven't yet become apparent.

Regarding Harry's notebooks, see "[www-dot-moleskines-dot-com](http://www-dot-moleskines-dot-com)", note the spelling. Pronounced "mol-a-skeen'-a", French origin. The real ones are well made; the imitations, not so much.

Reviews appreciated!

/AN

## CH14: Fish, Ghosts, Meds and Power

-1:07PM, Ravenclaw Common Room

Harry and his cohort had an hour free after lunch, and most of them had elected to hike back to the common room and swap books for the afternoon schedule. Harry, Steven and Jeremy climbed the stairs to their dorm, and pushed open the door. A mildly shocked silence ensued.

"Wow," Harry said into the silence. "I guess Richie was here, eh?"

The boys stepped carefully into the room, which was now full of hovering, swimming magical fish of all sized and colors. They floated and swam slowly around the room, circling through the bedposts and ceiling beams. A bright red snapper the size of a beagle floated by just in front of them, watching them with one lidless eye, fins and tail pushing it though the air.

"This is..." Hammond said, and look at Wright.

"..brilliant!" the both finished together. Harry tipped his head down to look over his glasses at a little yellow puffer that had floated up to him. It hovered at eye level, gently swaying back and forth as if actually under water. To Harry's senses they were pure magical constructs, not physical beings haloed in magic-still very cool, though.

"Flying fish, I presume?" Harry said, to the room at large. The other two chuckled at that. "They're not real, by the way, just conjured, but still brilliant."

"Clarkson is a ruddy genius with Charms," Hammond opined.

"More of a savant," Steven corrected. Harry grinned at him.

A two meter long swordfish turned the corner around Harry's bed, now pointed at Hammond.

"Whoa!" Jeremy gasped, side-stepping the fortunately slow-moving fish.

Harry looked over at the noise. "Hmm, that one might be a problem, yeah?" Harry said.

"I should say SO," answered Hammond, hand to his chest.

"Right," Harry said. He withdrew his wand and stepped into the path of the big silver fish as it swam toward him, pointy end first. Hammond's eyes went large. Harry stood his ground like a bullfighter, and the big fish swerved to miss him by half a meter. As the silver body swam by, Harry pressed his wand to and through the simulated scales. The fish continued swimming past, insensible. 'Apparently the charm has some basic visual guidance built in, but that's all,' Harry thought. He focused and quickly pulled the magic out of the charm, which made the fish freeze briefly in mid-air before fading away in a miniature implosion of blue light. The magic flowed around and into his wand, and the trumpet-call of the spruce in his wand echoed in Harry's head as it refined the magic into pure silver power.

Steven and Hammond were watching him with raised eyebrows. A school of minnows swam by Steve, flowing around him as he stood there. "I kind of like them," he said.

"Me too," Harry said. They looked at Hammond, who just shrugged, waving both hands at the ceiling. Casually, Harry reached over and touched the hearthstone briefly with his wand, letting the silver magic flow back into the massive ocean of Hogwarts' own.

Harry excused himself to the loo, which was fortunately behind a closed door and therefore fish-free.

When he returned, he found Steven trying to herd some type of puffer fish into a pillowcase. Hammond was trying to convince a meter-wide stingray to get off his bed, without success.

"Jeremy, you're a wizard; just hover that thing. What are you doing, Steve?"

"I want to take this one with me, if I can catch it. I always wanted a pet," he explained with a grin.

"Is that a puffer, or a porcupine fish?"

"It's a balloon fish, actually," Steven said, which gave Harry an idea. He retrieved a bit of string from his little bag of props, and helped Steve corner the fish in a bookcase by waving his arms around a lot in front of the fish. Harry caught it by the tail, slipped the string around it in a simple loop, and tied it off around the tail. He handed the other end to Steve, and let the fish go. It traveled to the length of the string, pulled against it for a moment, then turned back on a short oval path over Steven's head.

"There you go, mate. Your very own balloon fish!" Harry said with a grin. The little orange fish really did look like a balloon floating over Steven's head.

"Brilliant, thanks Harry!" he enthused.

Harry looked around at the dozens of smaller fish still circling their room.

"So, either of you guys know the imperturbable charm?" Harry asked with a gleam in his eye and a devilish grin.

Twenty minutes later three very pleased-looking first years trooped down to the common room. Steven held the string to his balloon fish in one hand as it circled lazily overhead. A dozen looks of curiosity and amusement followed him across the room. He selected an empty table with two chairs, set down his bookbag, and proceeded to tie off the string to the chair opposite his.

"Stay, Wanda," he ordered, looking sternly at the fish. It blinked back at him. He took his seat and began setting out his study supplies. Quiet chuckles could be heard from many of the muggle-savvy students in the room, including Hermione and Lisa who were paired up at a little round table near the hearth.

"That's soooo cute," Hermione enthused. "They're friends!"

"A dogfish is man's best friend," Lisa said. Hermione groaned theatrically. Her father was big on bad puns. Apparently Lisa' dad had the same genetic quirk and passed it in to her.

Deciding in this instance you couldn't fight nature, Hermione smirked and replied "That's a Moray!"



Lisa smirked back at her. "Cod this be love?"

Hermione winced again, and shot back "You're mentally eel!"

"Haddock enough?" Lisa fired back with a grin. She was frighteningly good at bad puns.

"I give, I give!" Hermione said with a smile.

"Have you read this yet?" Lisa asked, lifting up her copy of 'The Dark Forces: A Guide to Self-Protection' for Hermione's inspection.

"Only through chapter twelve," Hermione answered, unrolling her Potions essay. Lisa paused to give the girl a look.

"What? I LIKE to read, okay?" Hermione retorted. Lisa just raised her hands in surrender, opting for discretion.

Meanwhile, Harry had taken over a small table by the window, and was rereading the defense book as well. He very much hoped this class was as good as the book indicated it might be.

Kelly Bloom had a little table to herself on third floor balcony. She liked it here; it was quiet, and no one bothered her. She could tune out the world and get lost in a book. In fact, everyone in the common room was doing just that. 'The Sorting Hat got it right with this lot', she mused. 'Among my own kind at last.' But in fact there were people here she got on with - Padma and Lisa were night and day, but both of them had been nothing but kind to her. Even the older students had been exceedingly helpful so far. Kelly's glance travelled around the room, over the half-dozen or so people on the first and second floors. Hermione and Lisa were studying something together; Steven and his little...was that a fish?...were revising notes from one parchment to another using a pen in each hand. Anthony Goldstein was helping two second-years with transfiguration theory. There was handsome Roger Davies near the window, and Harry Potter sat at the next table, book held up to his face, unruly black hair the only thing visible over the top of the pages.

He was so SMALL, she thought, unusually so for his age; nearly the smallest boy in their year. He really wasn't anything like the character in the stories her dad had read to her when she was little, every night before bed. He didn't strut, or put on airs, or act like he

was anybody famous at all. He was just sort of...normal. Brainy, but normal. 'Dad would like him', Kelly thought. And he cooked! for Muggles! Every day! That was a revelation-that Harry Potter worked over a stove more than she did. What was it he'd said...that he cooked plenty, but the muggles ate it all? She couldn't imagine growing up in a muggle house. 'How did they get anything done?' she wondered.

The signal bell chimed quietly at ten before two, rousing the studious house from their books. The first years gathered to the left of the door, including a recently reappeared Clarkson, and set off en masse for their first Defense class.

Forty minutes later, Harry Potter was wishing someone would just shoot him. The role call had taken ten entire minutes because the man couldn't get three words out without stammering. 'Granted, impediments are no cause for discrimination,' Harry thought, '...but hiring a stutterer for a lecturing position? Would you hire a blind housepainter? What the HELL was Dumbledore thinking? Surely any of the seventh year Ravens could do a better job of teaching a first year class than this turban-wearing oaf?' In fact, similar if less colorful thoughts were going through the minds of all the Ravens right now. They were serious about learning and an incompetent teacher was an obstacle. None of them were pleased. The extent of Harry's note-taking so far were the lines 'trolls = bad', 'see book', and 'stuttering idiot.' The painful, sickly energy in the man's aura did nothing to help matters for Harry.

The slytherin half of the class, on the other hand, was just fine with the situation. Quirrell seemed nearly oblivious, afraid of his own shadow, inept, as he lectured painfully from the book, page by stammering page. He rarely looked up at the class, so mostly they saw the top of his turban as he attempted to read aloud. Malfoy and his Brute Squad were passing notes and food back and forth each time Quirrell looked down. Their near constant whispering and chuckling tested the tempers of all the Ravens including Harry. It was hard enough to pay attention and endure the dolt up front; the Slytherin trio's distracting behavior was utterly childish and disrespectful to their classmates. One of the Slytherin girls, a brunette, had joined in their antics, but the other three, including Daphne, sat aloof and ignored the troublemakers. She met Harry's eyes once, for a brief glance, and sent him a nod so subtle Harry

wasn't properly sure he saw it. He winked back anyway, but if she saw she didn't acknowledge it.

Bored and frustrated, Harry was devising ways of getting thrown out of class -seventeen so far - when, not for the last time, something very odd happened to him. Quirrell had ff-f-finally f-ff-finished the introductory chapter on d-dark artifacts. As he turned to the chalkboard to sketch out a diagram, a blinding hot pain lanced through Harry's head, making him gasp. He'd had more than his share of physical pain, but he'd never felt anything like this before; a red-hot poker was lancing through his forehead, making his eyes water in pain. He was barely able to think, let alone concentrate. His magical filters collapsed and the sensory overload multiplied his problems. Hogwarts' humming was now a blaring bus horn in his head; the floor and wall were bright as neon signs, and his classmates were each searchlights of fountaining energy. He didn't know whether to cover his eyes, or ears, or both. He'd went with covered his eyes with his palms, and gritting his teeth. Now he really did have a reason to leave the room, but he doubted he could find the door, much less make it to the infirmary, wherever that was.

Then, the pain just...stopped. As quickly as it had started, the hot chisel of pain in his head had vanished. Everything else still ached fiercely, but Harry could string two thoughts together again. Now, if the world would just stop screaming at him for a second... Through his clenched eyes Harry could still see the glare of the magic in the room around him. A bright something leaned into his view, a hand touched his arm, and he heard Kelly's voice say quietly, "Are you alright there, Harry? You look distressed."

Harry's sarcasm gland must have been unaffected, because it was thinking 'Distressed? -DISTRESSED? No, I'm not distressed. Distressed is an achy tooth. I've just had a flaming telephone pole thrust through my skull, but I'll be fine. No distress here, move along please.' Fortunately, some fast-recovering part of his pre-frontal cortex said instead, "Ugh...something clobbered me, but it's gone now. I'll be alright in a minute."

"If you're sure?" she whispered.

Harry managed to nod, and the glowing blob retreated to his left as Kelly leaned away. He pressed his hands a bit harder into his eyes, wiped them once, and passed both hands back through his hair. The

glare burned through his eyelids, so he placed his palms back over them and worked on taking three long, calming breaths. He knew he had to focus enough to get his 'filters', as he now called them, back in place. He ignored all the glare and noise as best he could, and focused on his own magic, pulling it back up along his spine into his head as he'd discovered that day on Diagon. His magic was in disarray, fluttering and choppy like bad ocean surf. Normally it did as he asked, but it was ignoring him at the moment. He'd asked it twice, and -nothing. Frustrated, and still in some pain, Harry thought at it, 'HEY! Knock it off!'...and part of him was a bit shocked that it...worked?

His fluttering, wavy magic froze for a blink, then collapsed and settled into a calm teal-blue layer around his torso as usual. Surprised but pleased, Harry thought '..Right, er...good job. Now, if you wouldn't mind awfully?' He visualized the magical constrictors around his optic nerves once again, and his magic flowed to obey, ready and responsive as usual. The glare leaking through his eyelids diminished to a faint glow. Harry risked opening one eye, then the other. Everything was shimmering a bit more than usual, but Harry thought he'd take what he could get. He ran through his similar process for his hearing, and the damn bus horn stopped blaring in his head.

The silence was like a drug itself after that experience. Harry sighed, and risked a glance around. Only Kelly and Hermione beside her seemed to have noticed. Her glanced right, past the two empty rows to the Slytherin contingent. Goyle was closest, hunched forward in his seat, bent over something. Draco was next to him, slouching deeply in his chair, twirling his wand slowly in one hand and concealing a half-eaten sweet in the other. He noticed Harry's glance and gave Harry a little lift of the chin in acknowledgment. Harry sent him a subtle nod back. Draco smirked at him, and turned his gaze to Crabbe as something was passed between them. Quirrell lectured for another ten minutes; Harry couldn't say about what. He was busy filling two pages of his notebook with all he could remember from the experience -the sensation, the sudden onset, his method of recovery, the lingering symptoms, including a standard-variety wicked headache. 'Precipitating factors: ', Harry wrote, and underlined. What HAD set it off, exactly. 'What were the variables?' his internal scientist answered automatically. He wrote down 'location-new classroom, first class here'. 'Fine, what else?' he asked himself. He wrote out 'Proximity to others: Ravens= unlikely,

frequent contact already, no prior symptoms. Slytherin= possible cause, intentional or otherwise.' 'Spell?' he wrote and underlined, remembering Draco's wand in his hand. He then wrote out 'Instructor:' and nearly crossed it out again. Quirrell was irrelevant, surely. The man couldn't get a spell off in a hurry to save his life.

Harry glanced up at the man. The silver-blue swirl of energy residing in the man's torso glowed faintly, feeding two large blue-black tendrils reaching up to a swirling dark mass hovering over the man's head. Maybe that had something to do with it? Harry hadn't seen or felt that energy anywhere near him though; Quirrell had stayed behind the podium for the entire class. Just to be thorough, he wrote down 'Black energy?' and 'Quirrel' after 'Instructor '.

Finally the stuttering professor assigned a modest essay on the reading and released them. Harry trudged out between Kelly and Hermione. As soon as they were clear of the door, he asked, "Hermione, have you got any ibuprofen or Tylenol here at the castle?"

She nodded. "Do you mind if we detour back through the tower? I'd be very grateful," he asked.

"Alright, Harry. You look rather miserable, you know, " She added with a pat on the back. "But let's be quick about it, I don't want to be late."

"Thanks awfully."

"What's eyeblood-prowfin?" Kelly asked.

"Muggle headache remedy," Hermione replied, while simultaneously Harry said "Anti-inflammatory."

"Ah," Kelly replied. "So...why not just take a headache potion instead?" she asked, genuinely curious.

"Well, aside from the fact we don't have one handy, I'd rather not take an unknown remedy when I've got something I know will do the job. Or rather, I will if Hermione lets me have some."

"Of course I'll share my stash with a friend in need."

"Thanks. I'll trade you a magical stingray if you'd like."

"That's okay, Harry, you keep it," Hermione said with a grin.

Lisa leaned over to Harry and very quietly said " Eyeblue-prowfin doesn't really make your eyes blue, does it?"

Harry caught her glance and shook his head slightly.

"Good," She whispered, patting Harry on the shoulder. She liked his eyes the way they were, thank you very much.

Four minutes of quick-stepping later found them in the common room, where Harry and Kelly waited as Hermione retrieved the meds. She reappeared and offered the bottle to Harry. He checked the dosage, did the math and took a thousand milligrams. Hermione accepted the bottle back, extracted four more and handed them to Harry after he'd downed the tablets with a glass of water.

"For later," she explained.

"Right, good thinking," Harry said, dropping them into a pocket. Kelly eyed the little white jar curiously. She assumed Harry wouldn't ask for the medication if it didn't work. Hermione dropped the jar into her book bag and said "Alright; ready then?"

"Yep," Harry replied. 'What the heck,' he thought. 'Just because I'm 'distressed' doesn't mean they have to be, too.'

"Let's go meet the R.O.U.S.s," Harry said to Hermione with a brave grin. She looked at him, and a blink later a large grin spread across her face.

"On the first day? Inconceivable!" she replied with humor, stepping toward the door.

Pulling the door open for the girls, Harry looked at Hermione and quoted the next line of the movie back to her in a bad Spanish accent: "You keep using that word. I do not think it means what you think it means!"

Hermione's laughter echoed down the staircase.

"WHAT are you two on about, exactly?" Lisa said, amused but exasperated.

"It's from a book by William Goldman called 'The Princess Bride'," Harry said.

"And a film, don't forget the film!" Hermione added, walking quickly now over the main lawn after the other students far down the hill.

Kelly nodded. She'd seen muggle 'moobie theaters' before, out with her Dad.

"Would you lend me the book?" she asked, leaning around Harry to look at Hermione.

"Certainly," Hermione answered.

The trio successfully double-marched themselves to Care of Magical Creatures classroom and found seats before Professor Kettleburn closed the doors. The other Ravens and Gryffs were already present.

Despite having just the one arm and a wooden leg, the Professor was animated and lively as he introduced himself and his specialty. Harry liked the man's no nonsense approach. Kettleburn outlined their curriculum through the mid-year holiday break, which consisted primarily of classroom work with a few short field trips on the grounds. The observation of small magical creatures along with their attributes, uses, care and feeding were to occupy them through December. Kettleburn liked large posters and diagrams, so he used a series of magical posters that showed various creatures in motion. Harry was very much looking forward to the week on owls.

The hour-long class breezed by quickly enough. Harry was pleased that his headache had diminished thanks to the meds. He'd have to work out a way to do a bit of muggle shopping while he was here. Surely there was a proper town with a chemist not too far away? ...Or maybe through an intermediary? Petunia wouldn't shop for him, but maybe Lisa's parents, or Hermione's? Could he prevail upon an older muggleborn Raven? Harry jotted those ideas down opposite his notes on poisonous snails.

Kettleburn released them with a two-foot essay assignment 'to include a picture, please, children', on what types of snails were edible and which were poisonous.

The first-years had a free period next, which Harry planned to fill with a bit of revising after a lengthy nap. He still felt rather tired, and his headache, while reduced, was still nagging at him. He wanted to be rested for his 'detention' tonight.

Hermione Granger and Lisa Turpin watched him shuffle up the steps, his usual vigor absent. The two girls were sharing a small table in the common room. Hermione was summarizing her notes from the day's classes, all of which were on parchment, over to a spiral-bound muggle notebook using a plain blue biro. Lisa had her head buried in a copy of 'Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them,' and every now and again Hermione heard an "ooooh" from her direction.

Some minutes later Hermione went digging through her bag for a book and touched the little plastic jar. Her brain traversed a line of thought similar to Harry's and reached a similar conclusion.

"Lisa", she asked, "where's the nearest chemist, do you suppose?"

Lisa Turpin raised her eyes from the book and regarded Hermione for a moment. "Hmm...out here, I'd guess Dufftown or Aberlour, but I haven't been."

Hermione nodded. She'd have to find a proper map and check that out. She wouldn't mind finding a phone and ringing her folks either. Maybe Penny could take her?...she'd have to discuss that with her at the next opportunity.

"If you're going muggle, I want pizza." Lisa said, having obviously sussed out what Hermione was contemplating. "Haven't had good pizza in weeks."

Hermione goggled at her. "That's brill, Lisa!"

"I know. Thank me later, with pizza. Sausage and Pepperoni is my favorite."



Hermione grinned. "I was thinking Penny could take me. Or us, if you want to come along. She's Muggle-born, I believe."

"Sounds like a plan. Let me know where and when, hmm?"

"I will, thanks! I'll see you later, alright?"

"Alright. Shall we walk down to dinner at half six?"

"That's fine. I've got a letter to write. See you in a bit." Hermione shouldered her bag and climbed the steps to her dorm to work on her second letter home.

The dorm room was empty and blissfully quiet. Hermione glanced around at their transformed room. Her bed was on the near left, standard Hogwarts issue but for the Paddington Bear sitting propped up against the pillows. She'd had Pads forever; his hat and coat had been mended so often and faded so thoroughly it was hard to tell what color they'd originally been.

Hermione set down her bag and retrieved her parent's last letter from her nightstand drawer. On a whim she folded herself into the deep sill below the arched windows on the west side of the tower. The afternoon sun was still high despite the time getting on towards six; a benefit of their northerly latitude. Sunset wouldn't be until nearly eight that night. Using an oversized book as a lapdesk, Hermione set about composing her reply. It was a relief to write on proper stationary again after using parchment all day. She'd reeled off a page and a half when a curious bit of motion drew her eye.

The chill hit her just as the sight registered; there was a ghost in the room!, and it was coming towards her. It's silver form was nearly transparent as it crossed the sunlit patch on the floor just below the windows. Completely agog, Hermione couldn't find the breath to shout. It was a ghost, right here, coming toward her right this second. The scientific part of her brain was apparently somewhat immune to adrenaline, as it cataloged the apparition's appearance: Tall, female, regal, sad. Hermione realized she'd glimpsed it before, at the feast, but not well enough to take in its appearance. Now she had ample opportunity: the figure was female, dressed in ancient finery. A flowing, embroidered silver gown layered with a satin cape adorned her shimmering form. A long, slender neck supported a fine-boned face with high cheekbones, delicate brows and large, perceptive

eyes; a long plait of dark hair swayed gently behind her as she glided slowly forward.

The figure slowed and stopped perhaps three meters away, and addressed herself to speech. The unnatural chill around the apparition made Hermione shiver despite the sun reaching her through the window. Her fight-or-flight instincts shouted at her to run. She shrunk back against the stone wall of the window and clutched her book to herself, preparing to fling it at the ghost and run past if she approached any further. The spirit hovered there, unnaturally still, and regarded her.

After a long moment it said softly to her, "Peace, child. I mean thee no harm." The voice was female, elegant, and possessed of an appropriately echoing resonance. Hermione blinked rapidly, but her eyes went immediately saucer-wide again. Hermione stared at the specter, breath coming fast and shallow. The ghost merely regarded her with centuries-old patience.

Finally its head tilted slightly to one side, and it said with a touch of a smile "Cans't thou not speak, child? Mayhap the cat hath thy tongue?"

"...Yes...I mean no, I..." Hermione stammered. The spirit's amused smile got a little larger. Hermione blushed in spite of herself. After a moment, the apparition spoke again.

"Thou art safe here within the castle, child. No ghost of Hogwarts may harm a student." Hermione relaxed marginally at that pronouncement. Perhaps she **WOULD** live until dinner. Taking a deep breath and mustering up her courage, she cleared her rather dry throat and said,

"Pardon, my Lady, but who are you, exactly?"

Seeming pleased at the question, or perhaps with her companion's sensibilities returning, the ghost replied "I am she whom they call the Grey Lady, spirit of Ravenclaw Tower, and daughter of Rowena."

"Really?" Hermione asked, before she could help herself. Her brain immediately supplied the relevant bits mentioned in Hogwarts, a History: 'Helena Ravenclaw, Rowena's child, stole her mother's

diadem and fled; murdered at a young age by the Bloody Baron; now haunts the castle along with at least three other ghosts.'

"Indeed."

Hermione really didn't know what one was supposed to say to a ghost, so she kept silent.

"And thee, maiden, what is't thy name?"

Hermione cleared her throat once more, and said "H-Hermione. Hermione Granger, milady." The little part of Hermione's brain not currently freaking out was marveling at the fact that she was indeed having a conversation with a ghost.

"Well met, Hermione Granger." The ghost seemed pleased. "I should guess thou art named for Hermes, Greek patron of those who wrote, of storytellers, and of merchants. And lo, I didst find thee writing e'en as I did approach. Thou art indeed well placed, then, in my family's house."

"...Th-thank you, milady."

The spirit paused then, regarding her, waiting. Curious despite herself, and relaxing a bit more at the ghost's non-threatening behavior, Hermione said "Milady...why are you here?"

The ghost took moment to answer, as if weighing its words. Finally it said "One who knows you did advise that I seek you out."

Hermione's brow furrowed at that. 'How many acquaintances did she and this ghost have in common, anyway?' she wondered.

"Fear not, child, 'tis a good omen."

"Milady...what does that mean?"

Another pause, then the ghost replied "...Much potential we see in thee, Hermione Granger. Thy ancestor's blood runs true in thee. Seek, and ye shall find." Her message delivered, the spirit began to slowly glide backwards towards the interior wall of the castle, becoming less corporeal as she went. Her ghostly eyes never left Hermione as she drifted slowly away.

Hermione's brow furrowed more, at that. 'Wait-What did THAT mean?'

"...Pardon, milady, but what should I seek, exactly?" Hermione called to the rapidly dematerializing spirit.

In an amused tone of voice, the now invisible ghost said faintly "...why, the greatest of treasures, child." Hermione's brow furrowed deeply at that, and her jaw hung loose and she tried to process the experience. A thousand-year-old ghost had given her a riddle. Mum and Dad would be so proud.

The first evening bell roused Harry Potter from a much needed nap. It was nearly half-six, Harry realized; dinner would be starting shortly in the Great Hall. He was immensely relieved that his headache and soreness were gone, finally. He quickly brushed his teeth and attempted to comb out the bed head, with mixed results on the latter. With a short sigh at the mirror, Harry made his way out of his room and down the steps.

He joined a crowd of twenty or so other Ravens in the common room, gathering to troop down to dinner. Hammond and Clarkson were arguing jovially about something.

"Flock!" Hammond said.

"Parliament!" Clarkson countered.

"Flock!"

"Parliament!"

"Flo-hey, Harry!"

"Hello, Harry," Clarkson said. "Now, would you please tell this IDIOT," He gestured to indicate Hammond, "...that the plural noun for a group of ravens is in fact a parliament?"

Lisa Turpin chose that moment to put her head in, throwing an arm over both Clarkson and Hammond's shoulders as she did so. It helped that she was a titch taller than Clarkson, and towered over Hammond.

"Actually, its 'unkindness' for ravens and 'parliament' for rooks, which belong to the genus *Corvus* - along with crows, magpies and jackdaws," she said with authority. Harry just pointed to her and nodded at Clarkson.

"And unless you boys want to see some 'unkindness' fist hand, you'll get a move on. Food, now!" A smiling Lisa added in mock threat, pulling little Hammond into a loose headlock and rubbing her knuckles briskly across his head.

"Geroff," he complained with an embarrassed grin while the other three boys chuckled at their mate being manhandled by a girl. Lisa was taller and more fit than any of them, by virtue of her developing faster and playing muggle sport, and they all knew it. Hammond wasn't quite ready to admit that he kind of...enjoyed having a girl wrestle him around. Padma looked a bit scandalized at their behavior, but laughter sparkled in her eyes, too.

The cadre of Ravens made their way to the Great Hall for dinner. Hermione sat across from Harry, who was between Padma and Terry Boot. Harry admitted to having detention after dinner with Flitwick for 'a prank,' which earned him congratulations from the boys along with admonishments not to get caught, and humorous disapproval from nearly all of the girls. Hermione kept silent, knowing the real reason Harry was seeing their professor.

The meal was excellent and thankfully uneventful. Harry spent the last few minutes spooning slowly at his afters and admiring the ceiling. The gentle music he heard from the magic there, as the galaxies and constellations floated overhead, transported him away from everything else for a few minutes. He found a moment of calm serenity he'd been missing in the circus of the last few days.

Harry made his way at the appointed hour to Flitwick's seventh-floor office. Upon arriving, he found a mesh of faint blue lines set out in front of the door; a new alert spell, he guessed. Not wanting to be predictable, he stood far to the right of the door and the mesh, and stretched over as far as possible to knock with the tip of his wand upon Flitwick's door. Silence followed his knock, so he repeated it. The door opened fully then, and Flitwick stuck his head out. He looked over at Harry, then down at the floor where the blue mesh still glowed.

"Found that one, I see." He sounded a bit disappointed.

"Yes, sir," Harry said with a carefully straight face. Flitwick canceled the charm with a wave.

"...Very well, very well. Come on in, then, Harry, " he said, retreating behind the door. Harry let a broad grin escape.

"Take a seat," the professor said, indicating a leather club chair that had been pulled up opposite his desk. Harry eyed the chair for a second, and seeing no magical emanations from it, lowered himself into the comfortable old chair.

"How are you tonight, Sir?" Harry asked.

"Very well, thank you, Harry. How were your classes today?"

"Er, Herbology and Charms were excellent. COMC was very interesting as well. Defense- not so much," Harry replied.

"Ah... you're not the first one to mention that. What specifically are your concerns, If I may ask?"

"Sir, Professor Quirrell can't lecture properly. He stammers to often and too badly. It's possible he may be competent at defense, but he can't get two sentences out without a profound stutter. Tell me sir, would you put a man like that in a lecturing position?"

The professor sighed. "No, Harry, I would not," Flitwick said candidly. Raising an index finger for emphasis, he said "However, the decision is not mine to make, nor is it yours. You may bring questions on the material to me, and we'll work through them. But you are expected to attend the classes, and turn in the assigned work. Is that clear?"

"Perfectly, sir. Thank you. But...what about the other Ravens? In fact, what about the whole school, having to suffer an incompetent teacher? Can't something be done?"

"Frankly, I doubt it. Several of the faculty met with Albus yesterday after a number of older students voiced the same concern. Albus is dead-set on keeping Quirinus, in spite of the complaints."

"Well, that's...hmm. So...we're basically just stuck, sir?"

Flitwick gave him a small smile. "Not entirely, Harry, not entirely. I will arrange for a seventh-year student to tutor the first through sixth year Ravens in DADA. I'll tutor the seventh-years myself. Ravenclaw House will take care of its own, first and foremost."

Harry brightened considerably at that news. Echoing Flitwick's grin, he said "So, basically we'll be getting 'supplementary instruction' to replace - I mean, 'augment', the official class?"

Flitwick smiled thinly at him. "Exactly right."

Harry's shoulders relaxed visibly. "Good-I mean, thank you, sir, that's excellent news."

"I do try, Harry; I do try."

"Sir...about Professor Quirrell. He has a very strange magical signature, almost as though two different beings were occupying the same body."

Flitwick looked at him sharply. "Really? That's remarkable. You're certain?"

"Honestly, I'm not certain of anything, sir. But his magical aura looks very disturbed, as if he had a...parasite or something feeding off of him. It didn't look healthy, whatever it was."

Flitwick jotted a few notes on a scrap of parchment, and said "Thank you for telling me, Harry. That was precisely the correct thing to do. I will speak with Minerva and...others about it, you may be certain of that."

Harry frowned. "Sir, could you keep my name out of it, if possible? I'd rather keep a low profile."

"Not much danger of that, Harry," Flitwick said with a genuine smile. "Your train story, and something else about... furniture?, I believe, are elevating your status in the rumor mill already. But, I will omit any reference to you regarding Quirinus."

Harry just groaned. "The train incident was minor at best, and the other thing was just a miscast charm, honestly!" Harry said with a bit of heat.

"...Mis-cast charm?" Flitwick said, eyebrows raised. "Do tell."

Harry's head fell back against the chair, his eyes closing in resignation. After a breath, he opened them and looked at the Charms Master.

"May I consider this to be covered under our oath, Sir?"

Flitwick nodded. "I sense this will be a regular request. Everything we discuss in private may be considered subject to my oath to you, Harry. One moment," he said, and turned to activate the privacy charms enclosing the office Harry'd seen previously. He turned back to Harry, who nodded.

"Thank you, sir. In Charms class this morning -which was brilliant, by the way," Harry said, flashing his professor a grin, "...I inadvertently spelled the desk as well as the feather. I sort of...hovered the desk for a few seconds. Someone saw, and presto, a new rumor was born."

Flitwick's eyebrows were very high. "You hovered the...desk? -The twenty foot long, six hundred pound, magic resistant, solid OAK desk?"

"um...Yes, sir."

"On your first day of class."

"Yes sir. Just a little. Is that bad? I mean, I know I have to work on better focus for my spells, obviously..."

Flitwick was now rubbing his forehead with the fingertips of one hand, eyes tightly shut. After a moment, he glanced up past his hand and said, "Harry...Harry, I have to strain to hover those desks myself. It takes the majority of my magical power to lift one. Those tables are in fact charmed to RESIST magic, so as not to disintegrate in our classes. The amount of magical power required to hover one is enormous. I usually ask Hagrid to move them for me."



"Oh," Harry replied, his own eyebrows high. "...Whoops?"

"Quite," Flitwick said dryly. He studied the boy across from him for a long moment. The claim was extraordinary, particularly for a first-year, and would require verification. But so far he'd found the lad to be honest and forthright; he was inclined to believe him, despite the apparent incredulity of the claim. How a boy of eleven came to have such powerful magic was another question, and one about which he was intensely curious. He watched Harry fidget a bit under his scrutiny, and concluded there was no time like the present.

"Alright, Harry; I shall accept your explanation for the moment, subject to verification at a later date. Satisfactory?"

Harry nodded.

"Now, if such a thing did indeed happen, your magical power potential must be exceedingly large; perhaps in the top 1% of the wizarding population." Harry's eyebrows rose again at that. Was the range of potential really that narrow?

"If you'll permit me, I would like to perform a simple charm to measure your magical potential. Observe," he said, and circled his wand around his own head while incanting 'Aperio Modus Facultas'. Harry watched the spell extend a wispy finger of power towards the man's torso, connect for a moment, and pull back to the professor's wand. A small cloud of golden energy drifted up from the wand to hover above Flitwick's head, and formed a rough '24' in translucent golden letters, which disappeared a few seconds later in a tiny burst of gold flames.

"What's the measuring scale, sir?"

"From naught to twenty-nine, of course."

Harry nodded, recalling 29 to be the knut-to-sickle ratio. 'Wizards and their prime numbers,' Harry's brain scoffed. 'Who can multiply by 29 in their heads, anyway?'

"Now, with your permission?" Flitwick asked. Harry nodded, honestly curious himself about what his innate potential might be; or more accurately, how modest he feared it might be.

Flitwick rose from his chair, stepped around the desk and approached Harry's chair. Harry observed as he lifted his wand and repeated the charm, and watched the spell repeat its earlier behavior. The small golden cloud rose above his head and condensed into a translucent number four, and disintegrated in a burst of golden flames a moment later. Flitwick hummed, and re-ran the charm, which produced another shimmering '4' above Harry's head.

Harry closed his eyes tightly. It didn't take integral calculus to figure out he was in the bottom seventh of the wizarding population, power-wise: a weakling, magically speaking. He let go a very long sigh.

Filius Flitwick was a bit baffled. The spell had worked correctly, he was certain. The boy in front of him could not possibly have done the things he and others claimed he did. A potential of four was a fine score for a toddler, but by age eleven...and then he realized, his eyes, widening- Harry was a toddler, when- his eyes sought out the famous lightening bolt scar. Flitwick's eyes closed as the revelation sunk in. 'It all makes sense,' he thought. 'Harry's magic was damaged that night, somehow. The poor lad; his magic hasn't grown with him. At this rate, he'll struggle to work any meaningful spells for the rest of his life. What a difficult path to walk.'

"Sir?"

Flitwick opened his eyes, leaned back against the wall, folded his arms and regarded Harry.

"Sir-I'd like your word that something...unusual, will stay between us."

Whatever he was expecting the boy to say, that wasn't it. He stepped back to his desk and retook his chair, feeling every bit of his eighty-one years. Even as part of him began to reassess his opinion of the boy, he said "You have my oath already, Harry."

"...Yes, sir, but this is somewhat...exceptional. An oath ensures secrecy, but your word carries your honor."

Flitwick lifted an eyebrow. Part of him morbidly wondered what this boy considered 'exceptional'. He studied him a moment more, then said "...very well, you have my word, Harry."

Harry took a breath, and said, "Most of the magic I use isn't mine, sir. I borrow it when I need it."

Filius thought his ears were playing tricks on him, then. He squinted at Harry, and said "I'm sorry?"

"Most of the magic I use, sir - it isn't mine. I borrow it from Hogwarts."

For the second time in as many days, Filius' jaw came unhinged, and the confused squint deepened. What the boy was implying...wasn't possible, as far as he knew.

Harry read the man's deeply confused expression, and said "...I know it's unusual, sir. At least I suspect so, based on what I've read so far."

"Harry, what you are describing...borrowing magic, it's just not possible, in my experience."

Harry's head tilted at him. "Pardon, sir, but why not? Don't we lend magic to an object when we charm it?"

Flitwick's eyebrows climbed again. He'd never considered it that way before. "...Well, yes, I suppose we do."

Harry nodded. "I see that magic, sir - literally see it. I can see the charm wrapped around a spelled object."

Flitwick found himself believing that much, based on their previous meeting. "Go on," he said with an encouraging nod, his enthusiasm kindling.

Picking up on Flitwick's tone, Harry said "Usually, when someone cancels a charm -or a transfiguration, come to think of it- I see the magic just...evaporate. It breaks up and fades away, sir."

Flitwick nodded, thinking that seemed to be an accurate description of a spell cancellation.

"Well, instead of throwing the magic away, sir, I just... draw the magic back in. It's fairly simple, actually," Harry said.

"Extraordinary," Flitwick said quietly. He'd never heard of such a thing, despite it being such an obvious notion once one heard it. The two regarded each other for a moment.

"I suppose a demonstration is in order, then?" Harry asked.

Filius started out of his reverie, and said, "Oh... yes. Please, Harry."

Taking his cue from their classwork, Harry gestured to an off-white goose quill on his professor's desk, and asked, "May I?"

Amused, Flitwick passed him the feather, which Harry held out in one hand. He brandished his wand in the other, took a breath, and incanted with vigor, "Caeruleus!" The feather turned a medium sky blue, maybe a touch darker. Harry held it aloft, and said "This is consistent with my results in class, using only my own magic." Filius nodded, thinking that looked about right for someone of modest magical power. He saw Harry cancel the spell, and then puzzled a bit as Harry leaned over towards the floor.

When Harry did not immediately straighten up, Filius stood and stepped around his desk once more. He found Harry pressing the tip of his wand lightly to the stone floor, eyes closed, with an intent expression on his face. Ten seconds passed, then twenty. Finally Harry opened his eyes and straightened up. Filius started a bit when he noticed bright blue and silver flecks dancing through the brilliant green eyes looking at him; it was a bit disconcerting, indeed.

Harry had some idea of what might happen next, and he was looking forward to it. He slid just a touch of power into his voice, and said, "Sir, would you mind casting the Aperio again?"

The extra layers of harmonic resonance in Harry's voice were not lost on Filius; his hearing was after all considerably sharper than human. What gave him a shiver was the startling similarity it bore to one other voice of power- one he'd heard from Albus on occasion. Though Harry's voice was less enhanced, and far more polite, it carried the same extra-ordinary tones. Filius hid his surprise, and did as requested. The charm glowed bright for a moment, then a golden

'26' hovered above Harry's head. Harry grinned. Magic was just bloody cool.

Filius was well beyond surprised, and briefly considered that he was dreaming, or was perhaps the victim of an elaborate prank. His reactions were possibly slowed by this surprise, then, as he watched Harry turn towards the far end of his office, brandish his wand, toss the feather in the air, and incant in that marvelous voice, "Caeruleus!"

As Harry expected, the feather changed to a deep, rich midnight blue. Rather unexpectedly, so did the wall behind it, and much of the floor. In fact, everything within the cone-shaped area of the spell had gone various shades of deepest sapphire: the books, bookcases, and furniture; the glass in the windows, the walls themselves; even a bit of the ceiling was transformed. The midnight feather drifted slowly to the ground, coming to rest in the center of the now monochromatic west half of Flitwick's office. Silence reigned.

Harry clenched his eyes very tight. 'Stupid! stupid! stupid!' his inner voice was yelling. His attention was diverted by something breaking the absolute silence of the room. 'Was that...a grunt?' he wondered. He turned his head to look at his professor, waiting for the reprimand to begin.

Flitwick couldn't hold it any longer, and burst out laughing. Loud, deep belly laughs came from the small-statured man. His mirth was contagious, and soon Harry was chuckling as well.

Filius laughed himself out and caught his breath, although the chuckles returned twice more when he saw a chagrined Harry standing silhouetted in his now brilliantly blue office. The two of them looked at each other and nearly broke out into another round of chuckles. Harry supposed perhaps it had been awhile since Flitwick had laughed like that.

Eyes sparkling with lingering mirth, Filius said "We'll start with spell focus next time then, shall we?"

A very chagrined Harry answered, "Yes, sir. I'm, uh...", he glanced back over his shoulder to the blue walls, "-really sorry about that, sir. Truly," he added.

Still amused, Flitwick said "Don't worry about it, Harry. I presume you can draw the magic out of the spelled items, as you did my door?"

Harry nodded.

"Good, then you'll have something to work on in Thursday's detention," he added with a small smile. Harry returned it with a grin.

"I apologize again, sir. Er...is there anything you want unspelled right away?"

With an amused shake of the head, Filius said, "...perhaps the windows, if you don't mind. I might get to believing I'm underwater, otherwise..."

"Yes, sir," Harry said, rising and stepping quickly over to the frosted glass. He touched his wand carefully to each pane of glass and drew the magic off, leaving the glass a frosted white once more. The room brightened a bit as light from the post-sunset sky filtered in, giving the blue walls a purple tinge.

"Thank you, Harry. Take this, and see if you can't get through at least three chapters of it for Thursday." He offered Harry a slim book retrieved from the shelf behind his desk entitled "Theory and Practice of Spellcasting: A Dueler's Guide to Improving Speed and Accuracy", by Erasmus B. Dragon. Harry flipped quickly through it, noting the dense, handwritten pages; something of a challenge, then.

"Yes, sir. Thanks."

"Thank you, Harry, for the most amusement I've had in quite some time. You are a MOST exceptional young man."

Harry nodded his head to the side. "In some ways, I guess, sir."

"We'll work on your control first, Harry. Take note of the visualization techniques in particular. One of them will almost certainly be of use."

"I will," Harry said with a nod.

"Take this one, too." Flitwick tossed a larger, leather-bound book to Harry entitled simply "Gobbledegook".

"I suggest you also practice the Aperio until you can cast it proficiently. It will provide a means of gauging how much magic you are in possession of at any given moment. "

"I understand. I'll add it to the list, sir."

"Excellent. Bring your class notes next time as well; we'll review a bit on the topics of your choice."

"Really? That would be great, sir, thanks."

"If that's all, Harry?"

"Yes, sir; I think I've caused enough trouble for one detention," Harry said with amusement.

"Quite," Filius answered with equal mirth. "Good night, then Harry. And do try to leave the spells on my door intact this time, if you please."

"Yes, sir," Harry said with a grin. "'night."

Harry shut the door quietly behind him, and heard Flitwick begin chuckling once more from the office. Thinking he was very lucky to have such an understanding mentor, Harry made his way down the stairs toward the hallway that would lead him back to the Ravens' common room.

Harry spent a quiet hour on the second floor balcony of Ravenclaw tower, revising his notes from the day and his tutoring, er, detention with Flitwick. By mutual agreement, the Ravens did not disturb one another while studying. He had only just cracked the Dueller's text when Prefect Penny came gliding by, literally, levitating up through the central vault of the tower. He heard her above, reminding others in a quiet voice that curfew was ten minutes away.

Sighing, he collected his things into his bag and shuffled over to the stairs, then down and up again to his dorm.

Inside, he found the room clean and quiet, just as they'd left it at lunch. Hammond was reading in a chair by the hearth, and Steven

was lying on his bed doing the same. His balloon fish was tied to his big toe at the moment, still swimming in slow loops around him.

A glance at Clarkson's bend confirmed the curtains were still bulging ominously.

"Alright, guys?" he greeted.

"H'lo Harry", Steven said from inside his book.

Hammond waved absently at him as Harry shuffled past to the toilet.

Nine and a half minutes later, right at the curfew bell, Clarkson came hustling through the door. "Oy, you lads would not BELIEVE what a stickler that old librarian can be!" he whinged. The boy came up short upon apprehending the clean and quiet state of the room. He hadn't LEFT it this way, certainly...

That's when Richard spotted his bed, with the curtains pulled tight closed, bulging and billowing as if alive.

"I'm not going to like this, am I?" he said to the room at large.

"That depends," Steven said.

Hammond had extracted his wand from his sleeve, which he then pointed at Clarkson and performed the now well-learned swish and flick. The protesting boy was levitated up and over the top of his rather occupied bed.

"How do you like sushi?" Steven asked with a grin that spread to Harry's and Hammond's faces as a girlish scream came from Clarkson's four-poster aquarium.

Author's Notes:

Trivia:

1- Silvanus Kettleburn taught Care of Magical Creatures until 1993, when Hagrid assumed the post.

2- In P.O.A (the film) the Daily Prophet mentions that Hogwarts is close to Dufftown, which also happens to be the site of many



famous distilleries. see harrypotter-dot-wikia-dot-com and search for dufftown if you're curious. Not mentioned in the books AFAIK.

3- Ravenclaw colors: Blue & bronze in print edition of G.O.F; blue & silver in the films.

Amusements: Should anyone care, these are some the sounds I imagine Harry hearing for different aspects of the story (remove the spaces around the dots):

[1] Great Hall ceiling: Peter Gabriel's 'With This Love(Choir)' ( itunes . apple . com/us/album/with-this-love-choir/id343347727?i=343347953 ), give it about 30 seconds.

[2] Harry's impression of Hogwarts' magic - (www . youtube . com/watch?v=wq3Df7ecKMo&feature=related), give it about 30-40 seconds. I'n not advocating for or against the content, just the pure sound.

[3] Hermione's impression of Hogwarts' magic (www . youtube . com/watch?v=MombANUT37Q&feature=fvw), multiply this by 20 :)

-Reviews, anyone ? Anyone care to beta-read?

END of CH14

## CH15: Coffee, Cutlery & Carpets

The half-six chime sounded gently through Ravenclaw tower, waking Harry from a jumbled dream about airplanes. The sun was just visible above the horizon, tinting the room with pale early-morning light. He groped for his glasses and slid them onto his still prone face, and the room came into focus. He glanced around and noticed that someone had stoked the fire, which was crackling happily. He sat up, slid his feet into his slippers, and shuffled to the bathroom.

On the return trip, he noted that Clarkson's bed was both empty and made. The conjured fish had evidently been dispelled, or the spells had a built-in time limit, because his drapes were tied open and fish-free. Hammond was just rolling out of bed; Steven was a bit further along. By whatever means, his little orange balloon fish had survived the purge and continued to hover slowly at the end of its string, presently tied to his nightstand. Apparently Wanda would be with them awhile.

Eighteen minutes later found Harry downstairs, standing before one of the east-facing windows, watching the sky brighten and the occasional owl come and go from the castle.

A familiar sound-feeling came into Harry's head, and he looked over his shoulder to find Hermione Granger approaching with a rather serious expression.

"Good Morning, Hermione. ...or is it? You look rather serious."

"Morning, Harry. Would you have a moment to talk in private about something...odd?"

Mentally, Harry sighed. 'Already, life? I can't even get breakfast first?' Outwardly, he put on a small smile and said, "Of course, Hermione. Where and when?"

"I was hoping we could start down early, and find an empty classroom for a bit of privacy. Oh, and I'm bringing Lisa along."

Harry arched an eyebrow, and said "Sure." He followed Hermione over towards the dormitory stairs, where they found a yawning Lisa Turpin sipping from a paper cup.

"Morning, Lisa. Is that coffee I smell?" Harry asked with interest.

"Morning, Potter. It's instant. I got Michelle to show me the hot water spell, and now I can make this fine coffee-like substance as often as necessary." Harry's eyebrows went up at that; he recognized a good idea when he heard one.

With a roll of her eyes, Hermione explained "Lisa is a fiend for caffeine. You do NOT want to see her before her first cup in the morning!" Lisa toasted her with the paper cup.

"I think the big room on the second floor is open," Hermione said to the two of them with a tilt of her head towards the door.

A short time later found them not in the intended classroom, which was sealed from the inside, but in a nearby storage closet. It was long and narrow and smelled strongly of damp mops. It held a partial suit of armor, a half-dozen empty picture frames, and an assortment of brooms, mops and cleaning supplies.

"Lovely," Lisa commented, wrinkling her nose at a well-used, grimy mop hanging just beside them on the wall.

Harry took a moment to study the taller girl. Lisa's radiance was a honey-brass color, organized in a strong, smooth field around her that sparkled with flecks of purest white and emerald. Harry found it very soothing to look at. Around her head, the motes of light were more frequent formed a sort of radiant halo which, Harry noticed, reacted much as Hermione's own radiance did when either girl was thinking.

"Hush," Hermione scolded. Harry noticed her own magic seemed...agitated. "I wanted to talk to both of you about something that might be important, and was definitely out of the ordinary. I trust you two, and I'd appreciate it if you'd hear me out, and keep this amongst us," she added.

Lisa straightened up a bit, catching Hermione's serious tone. "Can do," she said. Hermione looked at Harry, who met her eyes and nodded. They had an understanding already, about secrets.

"Well," Hermione began, "...I was alone in the dorms yesterday afternoon when the Grey Lady paid me a visit. Me, specifically." Two sets of eyebrows rose at that.

"I'm certain it was her. She identified herself as Helena Ravenclaw. She had a message for me."

Harry's head tilted forward at that pronouncement.

"She told me 'One who knew me' had advised her to seek me out," Hermione said. "Was that either of you, by chance?" she asked, looking at each of them in turn.

Harry shook his head, and Lisa answered "Nope." Hermione's lips pulled sideways for a moment as she mentally crossed that notion off the list.

"She said I should 'seek the greatest of treasures', and if I did, I would find it." Lisa's head rocked back a bit at that, while Harry squinted a bit in thought.

"Does that mean anything to either of you?" Hermione asked.

"Literal treasure, or figurative?" Harry asked.

Hermione lifted her arms in a shrug. Her own radiant circlet was bent in an adorable confused frown.

"Consider the source," Lisa said after a moment. "...What would a thousand year old ghost in a magic castle consider 'the the greatest of treasures'?"

Harry nodded approvingly at that discernment; 'treasure' meant very different things to different people.

"Oh," Hermione said, coming to a similar conclusion. "Context, got it."

Harry spoke next. To a ghost, it might mean being properly alive again, so maybe 'Life'... or, release from their earthly bonds so they can pass on: so, 'Freedom'."

"That's pretty abstract, Potter, " Lisa said. "How would you 'seek' that, exactly?"

Harry nodded. "Assume for the moment you're right; Occam's razor, then?" Lisa smiled slightly while Hermione nodded in agreement.

"So, probably a literal treasure," Harry said. "What's the greatest treasure of the wizarding world? A fortune? An artifact? Something rare, or lost?"

Lisa shrugged. "No idea. Muggleborn," she said, pointing her thumb back at herself, readily admitting her ignorance of parts of wizarding culture.

"Muggleborn", Hermione echoed, waving her hand.

Harry copied her wave, and said "Muggle raised. You know what this means..."

He looked at both of them, and all three got a very Ravenclaw gleam in their eyes. Then they spoke as one: "Research!"

Eyes shining with determination, Hermione said "Shall we meet in the Library then, after Potions class?" The other two quickly nodded. Hermione thanked them both profusely for helping her, to which Lisa just rolled her eyes, and Harry reminded her that 'that's what friends were for.'

'After all', Harry mused, '...asking a Raven to do research was like asking a fish to swim. Or float, as the case may be.'

They made their way out of the smelly little closet into the hallway, and began the walk down to the Great Hall for breakfast.

"This is going to be such FUN!" Hermione exclaimed.

"I suppose, yeah. Puzzles are fun," Lisa agreed with a nod. Harry rolled his eyes.

"With the three of us working on it, our odds of success triple," Hermione observed.

"Well, right," Lisa countered, "...Unless Potter here gets himself filleted into Potions ingredients this afternoon by Nosferatu."

Harry broke out laughing at that surprisingly apt description. Hermione's eyes went wide at the disrespect being shown a professor, and she wanted to argue, but her sense of humor betrayed her and she started chuckling too. That really was pretty funny.

"It's not my fault he has it in for me," Harry said defensively.

Lisa looked him speculatively with a half-smile on her face, thinking of all the pranks the four boys had played already.

"Really!" Harry said.

Her grin widened. Hermione patted him on the back in overdone consolation, and said "Poor Harry...we'll see if he singles you out today. If I were you, though, I would read far ahead so he can't surprise you."

"Yeah, well I have. In fact, I've read the main text twice through, as well as an alternate textbook I found in the Tower library, and the Magical Herbs Reference. It's just so much detail, and there's very little organization to any of it. There's no scientific rigor to it at all," Harry whinged.

"Suck it up, Potter, knowledge is power," Lisa said with humor, and bumped her shoulder into his as they walked along, making Harry stumble a bit and grin in spite of himself. He sort of liked her gruff humor.

The trio arrived and joined their cohort at the Ravens' table for food and more conversation. Harry was half-listening to the boys prattle on about someone named 'Krum'. He had just scooped up a second helping of eggs when across from him, Lisa produced a small metal thermos from her bag and filled it with fresh coffee from a carafe on the table. She dumped in a tablespoon of sugar and a splash of milk, too. Harry chuckled at Padma's wide-eyed amazement. Lisa dropped the thermos back into her bag with a pleased smile. That girl was positively brilliant sometimes, Harry thought.

Some ten minutes later the owl post delivery began, with Harry taking only cursory notice until a familiar magical vibration entered the hall. Harry looked up to see Hedwig gliding high overhead. Harry leaned over to Kelly, who was sitting beside him, and said "Budge over a bit, would you?" She eyed him curiously -they weren't particularly close to begin with - but she scooted over towards Steven.

Harry thanked her, which prompted Kelly to look down at the now person-sized empty seat between them, and then back at Harry with one raised eyebrow. He gave her a small smile and pointed straight up with one index finger. A blink later a flash of white fell out of the sky into the empty space between them, and arrested itself with a flare of brilliant white wings, silent as baby's breath. Kelly flinched a bit in spite of the warning; it was rather startling to have a large predatory bird suddenly appear at your side. Once her surprise faded a bit she recognized Harry's owl, and could not help but admire the beautiful bird. Hedwig had alighted gracefully on Harry's left shoulder and neatly folded her wings.

"Hello girl," Harry said warmly to Hedwig. Her bright amber eyes scanned the table, noting all the eyes turned her way. She assumed a regal posture, clicked twice in response, and nibbled Harry's ear affectionately. His hand came up to stroke the downy plumage at her breast with the backs of his fingertips, and his head leaned toward her briefly in a show of affection.

Quite pleased to see his familiar again, Harry crooned softly "You're my gorgeous girl, aren't you, hmm? Prettiest, smartest owl in the whole world, aren't you, beautiful?" Hedwig clicked once and made low thrumming noise in response. Clearly she enjoyed the attention from her human. Harry lifted a piece of bacon up to her, which she accepted with relish, followed by more praise and a bit of fruit. Across from them Padma was smiling at the their interaction, and at Kelly, who was blushing a bit at having overheard Harry casually say such affectionate things. 'Why was it boys could lavish affection so easily on a pet but be so awkward around girls?', she wondered. Padma hadn't noticed that beside her, Hermione was also blushing for the same reason.

In a practiced movement, Hedwig began to sidestep gently down Harry's arm, which he then obligingly raised level to make her passage easier. She stopped at the crook of his arm, bobbed her

head, and accepted another bit of fruit from Harry's fingers. After swallowing, she rebalanced herself and presented one leg with a small scroll fastened with a coarse bit of string. Puzzled, Harry retrieved it.

"For me? But...how did you know where to collect it?" he asked, unwinding the little roll of parchment. Hedwig merely looked at him, tilted her head, and clicked her beak at him twice, as if to say 'silly boy, that's my job.'

"Ah. Sorry, girl."

The note was from Hagrid, and said,

'Dear Harry,

If you have time you're welcome to come to tea at 4pm tomorrow. Bring a friend or two if you like. I was just about to roll this up when your beautiful owl appeared. She's a smart one, alright.

Cheers,

Hagrid.'

Harry got a brain wave. He fished out his pen, flipped the parchment over, and wrote out:

'Yes, please, three of us. See you shortly after four o'clock.

Thanks Hagrid!

-HP.'

Harry re-rolled the scroll, and simply offered it to Hedwig, who grasped it gently in one long-taloned claw.

"Take that back to Hagrid, girl. Have yourself a good day, okay?" Harry said, garnering a low hoot in response. Harry lowered his forehead slowly towards the bird, and Hedwig bumped her head gently into his, in a familiar gesture that drew a few 'awws' from the surrounding Ravens. Harry lifted his elbow gently upwards above his head, and Hedwig accepted the lift. Then she spread her wings,



flapped strongly twice, and climbed up through the rafters of the great hall and out into the September sun.

A moment later Kelly scooted back over and said, "Your owl is really beautiful, Harry."

"Yes, she is. Thanks. She's really special to me,"

"Obviously," Kelly returned, causing Harry's eyebrow to rise.

Kelly elaborated "The way you speak to her, and act towards her, it's- " she blushed faintly again, "...it's very sweet, Harry."

"Er...thanks?" Harry said, a bit cluelessly. Padma just shook her head and smiled at two of them.

Harry's earlier brain-wave reasserted itself. "Kelly", he asked, "-your father owns an apothecary, yes?" At her nod, he continued, "So, hypothetically, what's the most valuable item or ingredient he might sell?"

Kelly Bloom squinted at him for a moment in thought, and said, "What an odd question. From our shop, probably phoenix tears, or nundu's milk. Why?"

"Alright... is there anything more valuable, or rarer still? Something you couldn't find even in a well stocked shop?" From across the table, Lisa Turpin was paying close attention to the response.

"Assuming you mean things which might actually exist...there are a number of banned substances which are exceedingly rare. For example, Basilisk venom..."

she trailed off.

"Assume it's not banned, or dark," Harry said.

"Hmmm...various bits of dragon, I guess, particularly the ones from overseas; demon glass; rheem's blood; and possibly the elixir of life, if you could get it."

Harry's eyes sought Lisa's. She sent him a small shrug, which he interpreted to mean she didn't recognize the name, either. Neither

'demon glass' nor 'rheem's blood' sounded much like treasure to Harry, whatever they were.

"What's the elixir of life, exactly?" Harry asked.

Kelly looked pleased to be able to explain something, and said "It's just what the name says, an elixir that prolongs life, making you effectively immortal. It's real, apparently, discovered by alchemist Nicholas Flamel. He's over six hundred years old, so it must work." Harry's and Lisa's eyebrows went very high at that bit of information.

"And he makes this? Sells it?" Harry asked, incredulous.

Lisa shook her head. "No, silly. He makes enough to keep himself and his wife alive. The process is hideously complicated, and requires a Philosopher's stone."

Acutely aware of his ignorance, Harry asked, "Philosopher's Stone? Pray tell?"

"Wow, uh...hmm. It's a magical gemstone created by Flamel. It's rumored to be able to transform any metal into pure gold, and produces the elixir of life as a side effect."

Harry was rather nonplussed. "Wow...that's, uh...really?" he asked, squinting at Kelly.

"That's what I've heard, but only second-hand. The Prophet occasionally refers to him as the inventor of the stone, though, so I'm pretty certain that part's true."

"Hmm...so, a stone like that could be considered immensely valuable, wouldn't you say? Producing both the elixir and mountains of gold in the process?"

"Definitely," Kelly answered, while Lisa nodded at Harry from across the table. His eyes clicked to Hermione's down the table, unsurprised to find that she had also tuned into their conversation at some point.

"Going to steal it, Harry?" Padma asked, eyes dancing with mirth. "Master Flamel is a tough old wizard, I think you'll find. A bit old fashioned, but genuinely interesting to talk to," she added.

"You've met him?" Harry asked, genuinely surprised.

"Certainly. He and his wife visited the palace in Maharashtra when I was eight. He told us stories of our great, great, great grandparents," Padma said with a grin.

"Huh," Harry replied. His lip pulled sideways as he thought.

The warning bell sounded, indicating five minutes remained before the start of their first class. 'Surely all the time and money in the world qualified 'the greatest of treasures', he thought. 'What could be more valuable?' Idly he noted Lisa's aura was swirling in an animated fashion that indicated she was thinking quickly as well.

Harry noticed all four girls were looking at him.

"Well, that's really helpful; thanks for the information," Harry nodded to Kelly, and pushed his plate away. It sparkled out of sight almost immediately.

"Sure, Harry, but...why the sudden interest?" Kelly answered, laying her napkin across her own plate, which too sparkled away.

Harry proceeded to stand, as did most of the others. "Oh, uh...," his eyes clicked to Lisa, and her words earlier. "We're working on a puzzle, that's all. I never heard these stories growing up, so... thanks," he said, locking eyes with Kelly. She seemed to accept that, and nodded in response, saying

"Happy to help."

Harry's eyes flicked to Lisa, who nodded subtly at him, and Hermione, who winked.

The nine of them, eight Ravens and a fishy mascot, made their way out of the hall and onwards to the Transfiguration classroom.

Transfiguration began with role call and the passing in of assignments. Harry was pleased to see Ernie and Justin again. McGonnagall collected their essays and reviewed the previous lesson for a bitt. She then had them pass around a box of twigs, from which they were to each select two and pass the box on.

"Today we shall be learning an eminently practical transfiguration," she began, "...one you may use many times throughout your lives, should the need arise. Observe."

The professor gestured at two similar twigs on the desk before her, and incanted "*Facere cultellus et tridens argentum*". A yellow-gold cloud of magic enveloped the twigs, coated them and warped them into silver rods, which then began to melt and elongate. One flattened while the other bifurcated, then split again. The items resolved themselves into a rather ordinary looking but serviceable knife and fork. 'That's rather handy,' thought Harry.

"Your incantation and wand gesture diagrams are on the board," McGonagall said, gesturing to the hovering chalkboard with her wand to cause those same items to indeed appear there. "Focus on the details, students. You may begin."

As before, much enthusiastic wand-waving and mangling of Latin ensued. Harry chose to prepare for a moment, carefully noting down the incantation and diagrams in his Moleskine. Based on the last lesson and bit of reading, Harry had gleaned that the more accurate and detailed your visualization of the result was, the better your magic understood what you wanted, and the better your end product. The rest was just power and raw material. Harry spent the next twenty seconds visualizing the fork and knife: the size, the material; the surface texture, the taper of the tines, the serrations he wanted to see on the knife blade; the roundness of the handles. With those details fixed prominently in mind, Harry lifted his wand, pushed a bit of power into it, and cast his magic at the two little twigs on his desk.

He watched his teal-blue magic leap from the wand and envelop the twigs, stretching and morphing them into the visualized shapes. After a moment a recognizable knife appeared, but the fork was a bit lopsided at the tines. Sighing, Harry canceled the spell, withdrawing his magic. He repeated the exercise, refining his visualization of the tines in particular. His second attempt was rewarded with success; a passable fork and knife sat before him. Harry put down his wand and lifted the knife, studying it. It did indeed look fine, and had the heft of real cutlery. The edge, however, was as dull as the spine. He'd neglected that detail, Harry realized. He absently pulled the magic back out of the twig and set it back down on his desk, then reclaimed his wand once more.

The fork sat forgotten as Harry recast the spell on the knife-twigg five more times until he was satisfied, not particularly caring that he'd intuitively redacted the incantation to a non-verbal 'Facere cultellus' in the process. Harry's visualization was evidently getting better. He was now holding a gleaming silver knife sporting a serrated blade, a properly weighted handle, and a heavy bolster separating the blade and handle. He slid the blade lightly across the last page of his notebook, where it sliced the paper like a scalpel. Harry grinned, inordinately pleased with himself. It would be dead useful to be able to conjure a knife if he needed one. Or ten. One never knew.

Harry chanced to look to his right where Clarkson was seated. His year-mate had a passable knife in front of him also, but was struggling a bit with the fork. Feeling his glance, Richie looked back, and raised his eyebrows in unspoken question. Harry held up the gleaming silver knife, and Clarkson saluted him with his own. Harry pointed at his fork. Clarkson glanced at it, then shook his head and looked back at his own with a frown. He shrugged and cancelled his last attempt, then set about it again. Apparently his preternatural ability with charms did not carry over into transfiguration, but his work ethic was still strong. Harry was rather pleased with his transfigured knife. Now that he understood it, really knew it, he could recreate it at will. The transformation got easier with each iteration, and cost him no magic as long as he recycled it each time. The assignment was proving a challenge for much of the class, though, and Harry was getting a bit bored. He idly wondered if he could change the items permanently, or effectively permanently, so that they persisted for decades as some of the charms here at the school did.

Harry concluded that meant reorganizing the matter in actuality, not just in seeming, as typical transfiguration did. In truth Harry didn't see a whole lot of difference between asking his magic to pretend to make a fork, versus actually making a fork. He nonchalantly allowed his wand hand to drop to his side, tip angled down to contact the floor. Hogwarts' basso humming got a bit louder in his head as he drew magic out of the floor and through the wand. Phoenix and spruce sang to him now also, as the magic was purified and converted into the silver light he'd seen before - some elemental form of magic, Harry surmised. After a dozen seconds Harry casually lifted the wand away from the floor. The silver energy was flowing inside him now, contained by and mingling with his own.

He took a deep, slow breath and recalled his detailed visualizations of the knife and fork. Harry willed his enhanced magic into his wand once more, and directed it to flow out and embrace the first twig. A silver-blue nimbus formed around the stick, which began to wobble slightly. Harry pushed a bit more power at it, and the wobble increased to a thrumming vibration, but the twig was still a twig. Harry pushed what felt like a LOT of power at it, then, and it began to glow, but remained otherwise unchanged. 'WHY was this so hard?' part of him wondered.

Harry kept the spell running. He could feel the blue and silver magic all the way down his arm, some of Hogwarts' power along with his own flowing out through the wand. He could feel the twig as if he were holding it with magical tweezers. He asked it again to change, but it refused.

In hindsight, Harry supposed it was probably just beginner's luck that made him think to try what happened next. Harry shoved an armful of energy down the circuit his magic had created, a bright white pulse flowing through the thick blue cloud he was sustaining. Harry's perception of time slowed down as he watched the bright white energy meet the stick, slowly...exploding it, dissolving it into a thousand very bright, bronze flecks circling within his blue field. The magical sound-feeling from the wand changed to a sort of...trill. 'Interesting', Harry thought to himself, 'The Phoenix feather, maybe?'

Harry asked the blue magic to swarm around and through the bronze flecks, and construct the silver knife he was visualizing. Blue swirled obediently around bronze. A pause, then a shape took form, then mass, color and texture. The very bright golden glow began to ebb, until only his blue field remained. Harry drew it back up through the wand and into his hand, where it felt unusually warm. In front of him sat another very fine knife, accurate in every detail.

Harry studied it for a moment, curious. It did not have the magical corona that transfigured objects always had, in his short experience. In fact, it didn't seem magical at all. Harry considered that if it really were just a knife, that's how it should appear. Gingerly, he touched his finger to it. 'No magical feel from it,' he thought. 'Here goes nothing.' He touched his wand to the knife, and said quietly but clearly "Finite." The knife remained a knife, which pleased him immensely. Gathering his focus once again, he repeated his rather

different process with the other twig to create an equally detailed fork.

Harry sat back, feeling slightly drained but immensely pleased with the results. He set about documenting his process and results in his notebook. Occupied, he didn't hear McGonnagall approach. 'She is indeed quiet as cat', he later mused. Harry's head snapped as he heard her authoritative Scots burr addressing him.

"Well done, Mister Potter. Good detail on the knife, in particular. You seem to have a knack for it." McGonnagall graced him with a small smile, his second from her in a week.

Yes, ma'am. Detailed visualization is the key, just as you said."

She nodded at him. "Very good, Harry. Here you go," McGonnagall said as she tapped Harry's fork with her wand to reverse the presumed transfiguration. The fork remained a fork, so she repeated her non-verbal cancellation; still a fork. McGonnagall stood a little straighter still, moved her wand tip to the knife, and said clearly "Finite Incantatum". However, the knife was still a knife. By now, a handful of students were watching her rather than working on their own spells.

"I'll just keep these for a bit, Harry. You may continue with these two," she said, collecting his cutlery and setting two new twigs down on his desk.

"Yes, ma'am," Harry said carefully. He was rather disappointed to have lost the knife, but he supposed he could always make another.

Clarkson looked at him with raised eyebrows. Harry just shrugged, and set about repeating the exercise with the other two twigs. Three minutes later a somewhat fatigued Harry potter had a matching pair of elegant silver knives. They found their way into his sleeve before anyone else tried to cancel them. Using the tip of one, Harry peeled up two small splinters from the desk, and transfigured them into twigs. They wouldn't be permanent, but they'd last until well after class had ended.

McGonnagall had them practicing for another ten minutes, then moved back into lecture mode for the next topic: multi-part assemblies. A small watch-chain was the goal, with a knut coin

being the source material. She went through the theory and assigned some preparatory reading on the topic as the class time wound down.

Later that evening, Minerva McGonnagall would seek out her friend Filius for a consultation. Between them, she estimated they had over two hundred years' combined experience with magic. She was a bit taken aback at the unusual ...decor... in her colleague's office, half of which was currently a deep, monochromatic blue.

"Come in, Minerva. What can I do for you?"

She withdrew from her sleeve and placed down in front of him a gleaming silver knife and fork.

"Tell me what you make of this, please, Filius."

He waved a spell over the items to confirm nothing was jinxed or cursed, and nothing was. He picked up the fork and examined it closely, then the knife in the same manner. He tested the edge with his thumb and found it to be excellent.

"Looks well made, but perfectly ordinary. Student work, I presume?"

"Yes. A student created them this morning, from wooden twigs. I am unable to cancel the transfiguration."

"Oh?" That surprised Filius, as Minerva was witch of considerable power and mastery in her field.

"Indeed. Care to try?" she said airily.

Curious, Filius leveled his own wand at the knife and incanted a 'finite!', with no result.

"Hmm." Filius closed his eyes for a moment, focused, and threw a class five 'Finite!' at the knife. A Half-dozen other minor spells in the office collapsed, but the knife just slid backward an inch or so.

"Ah." He waved a complex spell around the items, and after a moment a glyph appeared hovering over them. Another detection spell was tried, then a third. He looked up at Minerva.



"These items are not transfigured. In fact, they're not bespelled in any way that I can see."

"Indeed. But one of your new students made them in my Transfiguration class today."

"Really?" Flitwick was intensely curious, now. "So these are..."

"My guess? They're transmuted, permanently," Minerva said.

The small man's eyebrows rose very, very high. "I was under the impression that was impossible," Flitwick said, gesturing at the cutlery.

"As was I," Minerva said dryly.

"Hmmph. Extraordinary."

He waved another spell around the items, and another glyph glowed in response.

"They're virtually pure silver, too."

"Yes, I noticed that," Minerva said with a touch of amusement.

Filius sighed, and rubbed his forehead with the fingertips of one hand. He glanced up at his old friend, grinned halfway, and said one word.

"Potter?"

The Ravens and 'Puffs trooped together to their next class, making small talk as they went. On the way, Ernie returned the stationer's catalogs he'd borrowed from Harry, and Justin mentioned their order would arrive tomorrow. Harry thought that would work out nicely for what he had in mind.

The highlight of their Introduction to Ancient Runes class was a review of the basic cooling and heating rune clusters, which stacked runes together 'like Tetris,' Harry realized, to achieve localized heating or cooling effects. He immediately saw the potential in the cooling cluster, which banished heat out of the environment to affect cooling. If he could adapt that Rune cluster into a sort of portable

heat sink, he could have a place to shove heat indefinitely without having to hold it inside himself. The reverse might also work, he realized; a rune cluster that provided an infinite source of heat would allow him to channel that heat back into his environment at will, independent of whatever magic he was working. 'Fire and ice, indeed!' Harry thought as he outlined ideas in his little black notebook. Professor Babbling had intentionally omitted instruction on how to scribe or power the runes, but Harry had plans to fill in those gaps in his knowledge.

Feeling inspired and energized, Harry made his way along with the other Ravens back to the tower for their hour-long free period. On the way, Hermione and Lisa fell into step beside him. Knowing nods went back and forth, indicating a private conversation was in order. The trio detoured into a classroom on the second floor. Hermione shut the door behind them, and applied a basic privacy charm. It took her two tries, but Harry saw the curtain of scarlet beads go up over the door much as as Flitwick's had done some days earlier. Impressed, Harry said jovially, "Someone's been reading ahead. Teach me that?"

Hermione pinked up a bit, but her expression was a pleased one. "I wasn't sure it would work, actually, but...yeah. Yes, I'll show you both. I figured we might need it."

"Couldn't hurt," Lisa said. Harry nodded in agreement.

Hermione spent the next ten minutes teaching the spell to the other two. She used a more elaborate wand motion than Flitwick had, but they were able to learn it fairly quickly, and practiced spelling the windows until the results looked right to Harry. Lisa spelled a curtain around herself, and then shouted at them from the inside. They couldn't hear a thing. All three shared a grin as the curtain came down.

"Bloody useful, that spell. Thanks, Granger," Lisa said with a smile. "I'll get a bit more sleep now, I'll wager." Harry nodded, recognizing the value it that since Clarkson snored something awful.

The three pulled desks into a triangle and sat.

"So, that was a rather clever conversation you instigated with Kelly this morning, Harry," Hermione said. Lisa smiled approvingly; Harry nodded back.

"Well, we have one possibility now, or two, actually, if you count the stone and the elixir separately."

"All the time and money you could ever want, from one object-can you imagine?" Lisa said, shaking her head.

"No, I can't," Hermione said. "But that must surely be among the most valuable treasures of the wizarding world."

"One would think," Harry said.

"But there may be other possibilities, " Lisa said. "Something none of us would have heard of; something that a magic-born witch or wizard would know."

Hermione nodded at the logic of that, and Harry said "Exactly. That's why the three of us are having tea with Hagrid tomorrow afternoon. We'll pick his brain."

"That's brilliant, Harry!" Hermione said.

Harry waved his hand in a so-so gesture. "Hagrid is honest and genuine, but he's not the most well-read wizard out there. We should ask a few other students from magical homes," Harry answered.

Lisa's eyebrows went up, and she nodded at the sense in that.

"And say what?" Hermione asked. "We're searching for a great treasure, do you happen to know of any?"

After a moment, Lisa replied "Stick with Pot-with Harry's line: `we're working on a puzzle`. It's accurate, but obscures our motives."

Harry caught her shift to his first name, and shot Lisa a lopsided smile. Lisa nodded back.

"Mm," Hermione nodded in agreement. "That will work for now, I suppose."

"I'll ask Ernie, Justin and Neville," Harry volunteered.

"I'll speak to Penny and Anthony," Hermione rejoined.

"I'll try Mike Corner and Roger Davies," Lisa added.

Hermione nodded once again at the other two. "This afternoon I want to research Flamel. Lisa, you look up the elixir, and Harry, the stone itself."

Harry's head rocked side to side for a moment. "Sounds fine. Divide and conquer."

"What say we ask the librarian?" Lisa suggested, receiving mildly flabbergasted looks from the other two.

"Well done, Lisa, that's a superb idea," Harry said.

"For that matter, let's ask Professor Vector," Hermione said.

"Good. Your idea, you do it, Granger," Lisa said with humor.

The three spent another half-hour reviewing what they knew or suspected, until the time approached to head off to their introductory Arithmancy class.

Arithmancy class itself was rather unremarkable that day, with Vector reviewing the first assignment at length to make sure everyone understood each aspect of it. They touched on the next topic briefly and were assigned another reading and essay. Harry admitted to himself that he still didn't grasp where the theory diverged from mathematics into the purely magical theory. Padma seemed to grasp it intuitively, but he struggled with it. He did see Hermione approach the professor after class, and waited outside for her to exit. She looked at his raised eyebrows and shook her head in the negative.

At lunch Harry sat with Ernie and Justin at the 'Puffs table. Amongst the idle talk Harry plied them with questions about the 'puzzle' he was working on, and they were happy to provide a few facts and lots of hyperbole about treasures of the magical world. Supposedly there were several artifacts other than the sorting hat left behind by the

founders of Hogwarts; Harry supposed those might qualify, if they still existed. Various items purported to belong to Merlin might qualify, if they ever existed at all. Harry made a lengthening list of magical artifacts, and sighed internally at size of the task before them.

Soon enough the five minute bell sounded, and the first years scattered for another hour-long break/study session. Given that Potions was next, Harry resigned himself to rereading the next two chapters of their designated text, as well as the corresponding two from the older, alternate text he'd adopted as his own. He'd chosen a little desk set on the highest balcony of the Tower library, tucked away amongst the foreign language references and compendia of wizarding laws from the 1200s to 1500s. Out of paranoia, Harry skimmed a book on common poisons and their cures recommended by Terry, half-suspecting another pop quiz directed at him this afternoon.

Towards the end of the hour, he'd called Hedwig to him using his pulse-of-magic technique, with her name blended in as the incantation. Harry put a bit of magic into his voice, then touched the granite wall and spoke her name, letting his magic flow out of him as he did so. He asked his magic to flow along the walls and ride on top of Hogwarts' own enchantments to find his familiar. Hearing her name rippling along the surface of the wall-stones had surprised the clever bird, but she knew her bonded's sound-feeling, even with the extra harmonics and odd resonances. She easily sought him out in the high tower, and alighted on the chair opposite him less than a minute after he'd called her. He had more fruit for her, saved from lunch, and a letter for the goblins in their white-marble bank in London.

Harry was unaware of the reactions of others to his impromptu usage of Hogwarts' magical frequencies. The heads of the all the portraits of the west tower had turned upward in surprise at hearing a young man's voice call out across stream of magical energies that fed their enchantments. Throughout the castle, all the house elves paused momentarily in surprise and delight, many pressing their hands or ears to the walls to see if any further message would follow. In the owlery, many surprised glances turned to Hedwig as the Voice was heard calling for her. She ruffled her feathers once in pride, and took off in search of her human. Far above in the highest spire of the castle, a brilliant red bird tilted its ancient head in

surprise and delight to hear something long forgotten by men echoing in the world once more.

Potions class began on time as expected. Snape had materialized out of the shadows, specter-like, to wave the door closed with an empty-handed gesture. He was not gentle. The THOOM of the thick oaken door in its frame rattled the specimen jars and glassware throughout their dungeon classroom. Absolute silence followed. 'The man has a gift for the theatrical,' Harry thought to himself.

Snake took role as before, but made no particular exception at Harry's name. Harry quietly released the breath he'd been holding as the professor went on to the next name. Finally, the role-taking was complete. Snape's glittering gaze swept over them, only his eyes shifting left to right across the room. The Ravens were focused and attentive; the Hufflepuffs at least awake. His eyebrow rose of its own accord upon seeing...was that a ...fish? ...tied to Wright's chair.

Snape's eyes snapped back to the third row. In a hard voice he said, "Potter, what are the effects of substituting Golden Chain for Goldenrod in a headache remedy?"

Harry looked up to a spot just over Snape's shoulder. He knew looking through the book on poisons was a good idea! Several hands went up around the room, and nearly all eyes turned to him to see if he could dodge another bludger.

"Death, sir."

Snape gave no reaction other than the command, "...Elaborate."

"Goldenrod is commonly used as an antiseptic and anti-inflammatory, sir. Golden Chain is poisonous and often fatal, with symptoms including convulsions and coma."

The other hands came down. Ernie shot Harry a wide-eyed glance. Were did Harry learn this stuff, anyway?

Severus glared at the boy, but couldn't fault the answer given. The reincarnation of his childhood nemesis sat there in the third row, carefully looking past his shoulder. His dead love's eyes looked up at him, or rather past him. The boy seemed...more Lilly than Potter,

Severus decided in that moment; the Potter he once knew was never that prepared, and seldom that polite.

"...Correct. All of you, write that down." A quiet scramble of quill scratching ensued.

"And if you were to substitute Goldenseal instead, Potter?" Snape asked after a moment. Only one other hand went up, that time.

Harry pulled his lip sideways and thought about it. Goldenseal was a general purpose curative, he'd just read, so it probably wouldn't do any harm; but as to whether it would help, he didn't actually know. How best to say that, then?

"No harmful consequences to that, sir, although the remedy may be less effective."

Snape glared at Harry for a long moment. He'd split hairs with that answer, but again he was essentially correct.

"...Adequate, Potter. All of you, copy that down as well. You are all to research Goldenseal, Goldenrod, and Golden Chain with half a foot of parchment on each for the next class."

Harry arched a brow. Perhaps that was what constituted approval from Severus Snape. Ernie sent him a surreptitious thumbs-up from the next chair. Snape's voice broke the silence once again.

"Miss Turpin, what was the primary active ingredient in the burn salve described in the last reading assignment?"

"Extract of Calendula, sir, also called Pot Marigold."

"...Correct. One point to Ravenclaw." Snape paused for a long beat. Harry wasn't the only one who noticed how that straightforward answer had earned a point, whereas his answers -totally outside the readings -had not. 'Can you say double standard?' Harry thought.

"Now, all of you shall attempt to brew the potion you were to have read about. Directions are on the board. Ingredients are in the cupboard. Pair off and begin."

Harry paired with Justin for the practical work. Harry was to get the ingredients this time, and he waited patiently in line to collect one of the small, ready-pack jars of ostensibly fresh pine nuts they required for the salve. Harry glanced at a tray of twenty-two small jars. Most were completely inert. 'Probably stale,' Harry thought. 'Ah, here's a decent one,' he realized, and lifted a jar from the back row. He bent down to collect a bit of gelatin powder from a lower shelf, and thereby missed the weighty, glittering gaze of the professor. Snape had observed him taking the jar from the back row, which he knew to be the freshest. 'Had the boy known?' he wondered. 'The boy' was doing it again, picking through the jar of dandelion roots to find five he liked. Snape knew the freshest were at the bottom, because he'd put them there himself before adding in an older bowl to furnish a sufficient quantity for the class. As he watched, Potter did indeed go straight to the bottom of the jar and select five of those. 'That was...odd', Snape decided. He concluded that 'the boy' bore close watching.

Harry found the ingredient preparation to be straightforward, but the brewing and solidification process took the better part of the two-hour class to complete. Eventually they were directed to deliver samples of their burn salve to Snape's desk, which Justin volunteered to do, earning a grateful look from Harry. Snape assigned an additional foot-long essay on the properties & preparation of Magical Morels, then dismissed them, much to Harry's relief.

Twenty feet down the hall, Lisa Turpin bumped her shoulder into Harry's, and said with a little smile, "Congratulations, Harry. You dodged the bludger again today."

"I suppose. Well done on your point for Ravenclaw, by the way. I wonder what I might have to do to earn one," Harry replied.

"Something disfiguring, probably," Lisa answered, causing Harry to chuckle in spite of himself. Her dark humor sounded a lot like his, sometimes. The look on Kelly's face at that comment made Harry grin more.

"Good job that you're on top of the material, though, Harry," Ernie said from just behind. Harry looked back and nodded; no use explaining that Snape was questioning him far outside their assignment parameters. His fellow Ravens knew it already.



"I may end up becoming a potions prodigy out of self-defense," Harry quipped mirthlessly. He resigned himself to another two hours of extracurricular potions reading tonight. He really had to ask Terry if there was a better way.

"Meh, at least you'll have job prospects, then. Assuming you survive," Lisa added with a chuckle which spread amongst the group. Apparently her black humor was catching.

Hermione stepped up on Harry's other side, excitement burning in her eyes. 'Oh, right', Harry thought. 'I'd nearly forgotten the other little project I'm on.'

"What say we drop our books in the Tower before heading to the Library, ladies?" Harry said.

"Fine by me, I need a cuppa anyway," Lisa answered. Hermione just rolled eyes.

"I'll be your friend forever if you set me up with some strong, black coffee," Harry said with a playful whinge.

Lisa laughed heartily at that, and said "Sure, Potter." Hermione shot Kelly a look behind the backs of the two in the middle. Kelly just wrinkled her nose a bit and shook her head; evidently she didn't care for coffee either.

The four of them had a brief caffeination break at window-side table in the common room; a pot of Lady Grey for Kelly and Hermione, and a metal thermos of still-warm breakfast coffee split between Harry and Lisa. Kelly had produced a box of shortbread biscuits, and they munched while chatting about their classes and their planned 'muggle' excursion. Kelly seemed equal parts interested and apprehensive about going along, but was finally swayed by the idea of Penny chaperoning. This "Peetsa" thing sounded interesting from how all her fellows were describing it.

"Might as well get us a proper coffee pot," Lisa said, directing this to Harry, who'd slugged down two cupfuls already. "I'll go halves."

He considered that for a blink, and replied "A french press might be more practical, what with not having electricity and all."

Lisa smirked at him. "Okay, fancy boy. As long we get plenty of strong java. Dark roast, preferably."

Harry lifted his paper cup in a toast, and Lisa echoed him. "No problem."

Fifteen minutes later found the trio entering Hogwarts' main library. Harry had been here once already, briefly, but had not had time then to look around properly. The place was huge, first of all, and divided into what might generously be called 'disciplines', then alphabetically by author. The Greater Whinging Library in Surrey had perhaps a tenth of the content, but far better organization, in his opinion.

Spells enveloped the room, he noticed, beyond those generally on the walls of Hogwarts already. 'Perhaps some form of climate control, for temperature and humidity?' he wondered.

The sternest looking woman Harry had ever seen sat behind an ancient leather-topped desk just inside the door. A middle-aged witch with a long, plain face and a tight bun of steel gray hair scrutinized them as they entered.

"Good afternoon, Madam Pince," Hermione said quietly.

"Miss Granger," the librarian replied. "Remind your friends of the rules, if you please." Pince indicated an ancient plaque on the wall, literally written in Old English script, which enumerated a half-dozen rules to be obeyed 'Upon Greate Payne', whatever that meant. Evidently they were much stricter back then.

"Yes, Madam Pince," Hermione replied in her practiced library whisper. Hermione waved at them to follow, and Lisa did so. The woman watched Harry intensely as he shuffled by last; Snape's glare had nothing on hers. Maybe he learned from her, Harry supposed. Harry nodded carefully to her as he passed.

Hermione lead them down the wide main isle past row after row of close, high shelves packed with books of every size and color. Narrow desks lined the aisles with small lamps at intervals, casting small pools of light into the dim stillness of the immense room. It felt ancient to Harry, and smelled faintly of old parchment, leather and glue.

Halfway down the room they passed a heavy, tall railing of dark wood dividing off a dimly lit alcove of six or eight shelves. The railing was shoulder-high to Harry, decorative but sturdy, with a single, narrow gate. A heavy read rope stretched across the gate, from which hung a small wooden sign lettered 'Danger!' and under that, 'RESTRICTED'. A single small, high window of stained glass lit the alcove. It felt like something out of a creepy movie to Harry; he shivered in spite of himself. Most of the books in there glowed with magic, and not the pleasant colors Harry was accustomed to in the Ravenclaw Tower library. Intermittent whispers came to his ears as Harry unwittingly slowed down to stare into the alcove over the rope. 'The books are...sentient?' Harry wondered. The whispers rose in volume, harsh and sharp in Harry's ears as he stepped up to the rope. The girls had continued on, but Harry stood transfixed by the sights and sounds coming from the dimly lit alcove. Of its own accord, Harry's had lifted and reached across the rope, breaking the boundary of the restricted section. He started in surprise as the nearby books began to vibrate and jostle on their shelves, as if disturbed. Some opened and slammed their covers; others levitated and dropped on their shelves. The harsh rattling whispers grew again in volume and urgency.

"Step back, young man," a stern voice said from Harry's left. He turned his head to see Madam Pince there, looking potent and formidable with a dark wand in her hand. Harry did as he was bid. The librarian stepped forward and touched the thick rope with her wand; Harry watched a spell leave her wand and knot around the rope. The books quieted, and the urgent whispering fell to a susurrous once again. Pince turned a withering glare on Harry. In a voice of wrought iron she said,

"Do NOT disturb the books in the Restricted Section, Mister Potter. They are not to be trifled with. Most of them are jinxed; several of them are certifiably dangerous to an untrained wizard or witch. Is that understood?"

Harry gulped; he couldn't help it. "Yes, Madam Pince. My apologies."

She nodded sharply at him, even as Hermione arrived to collect her wayward friend. The librarian had half-turned to go, when Harry said,

"These books...are they sentient, Madam?"

Pince stopped, looked back over one shoulder, and said quietly, "Nearly. Leave them be."

Harry squinted at that answer; he was pretty sure sentience was a binary condition, but with enough magic...

"Come on, Harry," Hermione said, looping an arm through his and physically dragging him off his spot in front of the gate. "You can play with the dangerous, life-threatening books some other time. We have work to do!" Harry grinned at that, and considered that maybe Lisa's dark humor was rubbing off on Hermione, for the better.

They found Lisa seated on a four-square table under a frosted window at the rear of the library. It and another table occupied a sort of oasis formed by two high shelves and the castle walls. A large tapestry embroidered with a pastoral scene adorned one wall; the other featured a large Hogwarts coat of arms. Harry did a double-take when one of the embroidered sheep lifted its head, started wandering across the tapestry and right off the edge. Harry grinned, and turned back to the table.

"Get lost back there, Potter?" Lisa asked with humor. Harry tipped his head sideways in a sort of shrug.

"Saw something interesting," he replied with a lopsided grin. Hermione harrumphed at him. Lisa grinned back.

Hermione had produced her muggle spiral notebook and a biro. Harry noted the top of the page said simply, 'TREASURES'.

"Alright, let's review. I'm going to research Flamel the man," Hermione said, writing it out as she did so. "...Lisa is researching the Elixir of life," she wrote that out atop a second page, "...and our troublemaker here," she said, leaning her pen toward Harry, "...is researching the Philosopher's Stone." She wrote that atop a third page, tore the three pages out, and distributed them. Lisa's eyebrows rose in amusement at his new honorific.

"Meet back here in ninety minutes, let's say, and I'll consolidate the notes."

"Right. Sounds like a plan," Harry said, moving to stand and drop his robes over the back of his chair. He pulled his notebook from his bag and set off in search of references to the possibly mythical item. He tried mineralogy first, then books on spells for precious metals. The Big Book of Magical Objects gave him something, albeit a rewording of what they already knew. He copied it out anyway. He moved on to texts on mythical objects, reference books and compendia. In the reference section, he noticed a display case sitting in the corner, apparently full of brackish water. Harry's eyebrow rose. 'What an odd thing to have in a library,' he thought as he stepped nearer for a better look.

At the bottom of the case on a bed of stones sat a thick, hand-sewn book covered in...scales? A little plaque proclaimed the book to be 'A Moderne Dictionarie of Mermish, Gifte of King Hydron XI to Hogwarts, 1590.' Harry nodded, part of him noting with amusement how his brain took that in stride. His tolerance for sheer weirdness must be getting higher, he concluded. Four more passing references to the stone were all he found, and all cited Flamel as the only current owner of a Philosopher's Stone.

Ninety-two minutes later found the trio back at the table. Hermione had nearly two full sides of notes on Nicholas Flamel. Lisa had three quarters of a page on the elixir, and Harry about the same on the stone. Harry suspected the books mentioning Flamel were actually the best source of information about all three topics. Harry shared his list of other possible treasures with the girls, who took copies to think on. Hermione set about revising and consolidating their notes on Flamel into one coherent document, while Harry and Lisa got a bit of homework done until dinner.

Some time later a rather prominent stomach gurgle came from Lisa's direction. Hermione rolled her eyes and checked her wristwatch, which amazingly still worked. 'Must be the spring type, purely mechanical- clever girl,' Harry realized. Come to think on it, he'd seen Flitwick with a timepiece, too, a pocketwatch. He'd have to see if he couldn't find himself one on their little shopping trip.

"Well," Hermione said, pen still poised, "It's nearly half-six; dinner will be starting soon. I'm inclined to stay and work a bit more, but if you two want to eat, be my guest." Her eyes dropped immediately to her notebook again.

Harry and Lisa shared a look. They both suspected Hermione would be here until closing if they left her to her own devices. Harry winked at Lisa across the table and nodded sideways at their friend. Lisa gave exaggerated sigh, which caused Hermione to glance to her.

"...Can't have that, Granger. A girl's got to eat. You'll work right up until astronomy class if we let you. You can't solve the big mysteries in one day, you know. That's why they're mysteries," Lisa said with a smile.

Hermione looked to Harry, who said, "I vote we all go eat. You can come back later if you want. The books will be here, Hermione." Her made air quotes with his fingers and said `Conquer your haste`, as the Zen Masters say."

Hermione's eyes went a bit wide as the recognition kicked in. These two had guessed her intention to work right through dinner correctly. 'Is this what having friends is like?' she wondered. Amusement was dancing in Harry's impossibly green eyes as he looked expectantly at her.

Friends, she thought. "Alright, alright, you win," Hermione said with humor. "I guess I can come back after dinner." Lisa grinned.

The trio spent the first half of the dinner hour actually eating, and the second half visiting with people who might help them with their 'puzzle'. Harry found Neville, Fred and George to be a font of information, most of it incredible. He suspected the twins of pulling his leg about a tank full of preserved human brains, but he wrote it down anyway.

Hermione had ensconced herself between Penny and Anthony, and had mentioned their little puzzle. She took down their suggestions, and then pitched her 'muggle shopping trip' idea to great response. Apparently the seventh-years had weekend privileges at the end of the month, and Hermione managed to convince the two prefects that taking four firsties on a muggle shopping excursion would be 'fun'. Evidently Penny was nutters for good pizza as well, so that idea sold the whole trip. Anthony soon folded to the combined will of the two smart girls next to him; he knew when to choose his battles. He stipulated that they clear it with Flitwick in advance, in writing, to which the girls readily agreed.

Lisa Turpin had engaged Roger Davies and Michael Corner rather easily in conversation about quidditch. Roger was on the Ravenclaw team last year as a chaser, and Michael was simply a fan of the sport. She'd absorbed two books on it already, and saw many similarities to her own sport of field hockey-minus all the flying, of course. She had every intention of trying out for the house team in her second year, and told the boys so. Roger looked at her appraisingly, then, and offered his opinion that she'd make a fine beater given her skill with a wooden stick. Lisa beamed at him; it was hard not to like Roger. She slipped in casual mention of 'a little puzzle' they were working on 'for extra credit', and plied them with a few questions about wizarding treasures. Michael's best idea was basilisk hide, but Roger said without any coaching whatsoever,

"Why, a Philosopher's Stone, of course. At the moment there's only one known to exist- old Nick Flamel has it." Lisa wrote it down, nodded and thanked him, and tried to keep her grin to herself.

Dinner eventually wound down. The eight young Ravens and their piscine mascot trooped out of the great hall together, and split at the stairway leading to Ravenclaw Tower. Hermione, and surprisingly Jeremy and Steven (and Wanda) were headed for the main library, whereas the others were making for the common room.

"Mind the time, you lot. Astronomy class tonight, don't be late. We'll send a search party around if we have to," Lisa said to the library-goers with a wave.

"Wanda, keep an eye on Steven," Harry added with a carefully straight face, looking at the fish as he said it. She glubbed back at him. Steven grinned broadly, and even Hermione smiled at their antics.

It was a bit after eight when Harry and the others made it back to the common room, and the sun was just going down. Harry got over three hours of studying done, completing his essays, reading the first sections of the dueler's handbook, and revising in his 'normal' and 'special' notebooks. The Gobbledegook text turned out to be Flitwick's own personal notebook on the subject, and was therefore irreplaceable, Harry realized. His mentor was extending him a great trust with that item. His studying paused when Lisa approached, swishing her metal thermos in one hand invitingly. Harry eagerly nodded to her, and she sat down across from him. She produced

two paper cups from somewhere, and proceeded to pour the remainder of the thermos into the two cups. She waved a packet of sugar at Harry, which he readily accepted and dumped into his cup.

"Thanks very much", Harry said with relish. "I could use a cup to keep me awake through Astronomy." He'd heated his own cup as soon as he'd lifted it, finding the coffee lukewarm at best. Steam now drifted happily from his cup.

"Anytime, Harry. Sorry it's barely warm, though, maybe we could..." she trailed off, looking at the steam rising from his cup. "How...?" she asked, pointing with one finger toward his cup.

"Trade secret," Harry said with amusement. "Shall I warm that for you?"

"Please," she replied, holding her cup out to him. She wanted to see this spell. Instead, she saw Harry bloody Potter touch his fingertip to her cup, and it started warming almost immediately in her hand. In ten seconds or so, wisps of steam were coiling away from the coffee, and it was almost too hot to hold. He'd never drawn a wand or cast a spell. He was showing off and they both knew it, but that was bloody cool, if she did say so herself. Externally, Lisa merely raised an eyebrow and looked at the boy across the table. He smirked back, ignoring the rapidly melting frost now covering his shoes.

"You're an odd duck, Harry Potter," she said after a careful sip.

"Why, thank you," he replied with a grin.

"And thank you," she rejoined, gesturing with her cup.

"No problem."

"You waiting on Granger, then?"

"I suppose, yeah. I'd just like to know she got back safely, that's all."

"Are you two...close?" Lisa asked carefully.

"...just friends. I don't know all that many people, really, but I do try to look out for the ones I consider friends."



Lisa nodded. "Smart not to take too much for granted."

"Yeah." Harry wondered if they had more in common than she let on.

"Besides, we muggle-raised types have to stick together," he added after a moment. Lisa gave him a little nod in reply.

At eleven-twenty-five the library group shuffled in, along with a handful of older Ravens who'd obviously been there as well. Which made sense, really.

Hermione visited their table briefly, said she'd found a thing or two that helped a bit, and asked to talk again in the morning. They agreed, but Lisa stipulated no more smelly storage closets before breakfast.

They parted ways temporarily in the dormitory stairwell. Intent on collecting his books and telescope, Harry was morbidly curious to see what condition their room might be in. He found it to be mostly normal, apart from the wailing form of Jeremy Hammond. He appeared to be on his knees next to his bed, as Harry could only see his the top of his head sticking up. Their other roommates were apparently still downstairs.

"Oy-Harry! Thank Merlin you're here, mate! Lend us a hand, would you? -Please?"

Harry stepped around the bed to find that Hammond was not in fact on his knees; rather, he was sunk up to his waist in the narrow carpet runner beside his bed, as if in quicksand. He was clinging desperately to the hangings on his bed. Harry goggled a bit at that.

"Er...what is that, exactly?" Harry asked, squinting at the bespelled, roiling carpet.

"Persian quick-rug spell," Hammond said rather distressingly. "Stay off it, you'll be fine. Bloody Clarkson is going to get it, I swear! How about a hand, yeah?"

Harry stepped as near as he dared to the carpet, and grasped Hammond's outstretched hand. "Should a first-year even know that spell?" He asked conversationally as he heaved back on his fellow.

"His cousin got him with it, I expect," Hammond said, rising an inch. "I may have -grrrr- charmed his toothpaste this morning, and he's seen fit to escalate to this!"

Harry shook his head in exasperation even as he heaved with all of his body weight in an attempt to free Hammond. He'd risen a foot or so, but was still firmly mired. Hammond's grip slipped, and he cried out as he slopped back down into the carpet. They tried again, with the same result.

"Gaah! Harry, do something, please? Anything!" Hammond pleaded. He had sunk up to his chest, now.

Harry thought about what might work. He drew his wand and tried the hover charm, which merely lifted the whole carpet off the floor, struggling boy and all. He considered freezing the carpet solid, but that might imprison Hammond too tightly to escape. Canceling the spell seemed best. Meanwhile, Hammond had gone very quiet.

"Harry, now would be a fine time to try absolutely anything, please." He was up to his neck, and keeping very still so as not to sink faster.

"Right," Harry said. "Here goes nothing, then." He knelt down and touched the corner of the carpet with his wand. He could see the rippling web-like enchantment distorting the fabric. With one hand on the floor as a sink, and his wand touching the magical source, Harry began s-l-o-w-l-y drawing off the magic of the spell and funneling it out through his other hand into the floor. As the jinx got weaker, Hammond began to rise, lifted from below as the magical pit became shallower.

"It's working! Whatever you're doing, mate, keep it up!" he exclaimed.

Harry bled the magic away from the spell over the next ten seconds, and Hammond rose up out of the carpet as if on an elevator. When his knees were clear he stepped out of the soft-sided hole and onto the granite floor once more. Harry drained the spell completely, then, directing the remainder of its magic into the stones of Hogwarts. The carpet was just a carpet once was still panting from his ordeal.

He patted Harry on the back and said, "Thanks awfully, Harry. I shudder to think what would have happened if you hadn't come in when you did." He kicked a foot tentatively at the carpet. "Ruddy

magical quicksand carpet - what was he thinking? I might've been killed!"

Harry kind of doubted Richie would have made it a fatal trap, at least on purpose - no accounting for oversights, though.

"It's safe now," Harry said. "Spell's canceled."

"Well that's fine," Hammond said, bending down and beginning to roll the carpet up. "But I'm a bit put off by it now, seeing as it tried to kill me and all," He added. Hammond held the rolled carpet gingerly, marched straight over to the hearth, and tossed it onto the low fire burning there. He stood back to watch it catch.

"Ah," Harry said. "It's your stuff, mate, but it seems to me the real problem is your prank war, not your innocent possessions."

Jeremy gave him a speculative look. "You think?"

"Yep," Harry said over his shoulder as he walked back toward his trunk to gather his things.

-end of Ch15-

Author's Notes:

Thanks to the kind beta Faia Sakura.

For those who've asked, of course there will be a paring. YOU can help choose. I have added a fanfiction poll to give this story's readers a chance to choose Harry's girlfriend: ([www . fanfiction . net/u/1513611/Mr\\_Ragtop#](http://www.fanfiction.net/u/1513611/Mr_Ragtop#)) I have my preferences but they're not strong ones, so I figured I'd ask all of you. I deem Tonks too old until Harry's at least 17; apologies to you Honks fans. Luna, Ginny and Cho will show up next year as expected, so they make the poll.

Word power: cohort - 'a company of companions or supporters'

Amusements:

Should anyone care, these are some the sounds I imagine Harry hearing for different aspects of the story:

[1] Great Hall ceiling: Peter Gabriel's 'With This Love(Choir)' ( [itunes . apple . com/us/album/with-this-love-choir/id343347727?i=343347953](https://itunes.apple.com/us/album/with-this-love-choir/id343347727?i=343347953) ), give it about 30 seconds.

[2] Harry's impression of Hogwarts' magic - ( [www . youtube . com/watch?v=wq3Df7ecKMo&feature=related](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wq3Df7ecKMo&feature=related) ), give it about 30-40 seconds. I'm not advocating for or against the content, just the pure sound.

[3] Hermione's impression of Hogwarts' magic ( [www . youtube . com/watch?v=MombANUT37Q&feature=fvw](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MombANUT37Q&feature=fvw) ), multiply this by 20 :)

[4] Nearly any track from any Sigur Ros disc...

## CH16: Snakes, Bears & Ravens

Thousands of stars glittered overhead in the crisp night air as Thursday morning officially began in northern Scotland. It must have been around 10 degrees Celsius, Harry supposed, from the way his breath was visible in the still night air. He was astonished at first by brightness of the stars visible out here, away from the lights of the city. Even with their simple telescopes, one could make out incredible detail in the glowing band of the Milky Way floating overhead, and pick out several of the nearer planets with little difficulty.

Professor Aurora Sinistra was another new face to Harry; tall, thin and elegant as a magazine model, with warm brown skin that spoke of Moorish ancestry, her radiance was one of gold and emerald particles so small and fine that from any appreciable distance, they appeared as a slowly swirling mist to Harry, and rang with the sound-feeling of a rubbed wine-glasses. It suited her, Harry thought.

The class was gathered near the security railings of the east side of the Astronomy tower. They were organized in pairs, working through the initial assignment together, namely finding and identifying two dozen or so heavenly bodies. Harry and Steven had partnered up, and Harry was quite glad of that, as Steven had obviously done a bit of this before. To their right were Hermione and Lisa, and to their left were Daphne and a girl Harry recognized as Tracey Davis, though they'd not been introduced. Clarkson had made a good impression by coming 'round just before class and offering heating charms for the coats of all the girls; clever boy, that Richie.

Harry didn't need a charm. He had learned years ago in a drafty cupboard how to pull heat out of his surroundings to keep himself warm. Aided by the accidental hole in his shoe, he could also take a bit of heat right out of the stone blocks beneath his feet. The huge stones were warmed from below by the considerable heat rising through the tower and had a generous portion of heat to lend.

Sinistra glided slowly among them, asking guiding questions and providing assistance as required in calm, eloquent tones. Harry was rather enjoying this class; it combined the practical element of the equipment, the beauty of the subject, and a fair bit of science. He was far removed from the Slytherin trio, and the cold and late hour

seemed to have dulled their appetite for mischief. They seemed to be largely indifferent to Ravenclaws in general.

Harry stood next Steven, jacket unzipped, sans gloves or scarf, taking notes in his black muggle notebook while peering at Mars through a brass telescope Galileo would have recognized. Forty minutes or so had passed, and thanks to Steven's prior experience, they were nearly done with their stellar searching. Both were enjoying themselves, though, and it barely felt like work at all to Harry.

"Alright, Harry, what's next?" Steven asked, flipping back to a declination chart as he did so.

"Hmm... number twenty-two, Betelgeuse; apparently it's in Orion."

"Yeah, with Bellatrix; those two make up Orion's shoulders..." Steven had turned the telescope nearly due East and low in the sky. He sighted, focused the eyepiece and stepped back. "Take a look."

Harry bent close to the eyepiece. "...Wow, it's very red, isn't it?"

"Definitely. My Dad's favorite, if you can believe that."

"Hmmm...and the three just below?"

"Orion's belt. Pretty cool, eh?"

"Very," Harry responded with a nod. Steven ginned back. Harry's eye happened to shift past Steven to Hermione, who stood some meters away, bundled in woolen coat, hat, and Ravenclaw scarf. Apparently standing still in the cool night air was not her most favorite pass-time, and the warming charm was starting to ebb. She rubbed her hands together vigorously and stuck them under her arms while Lisa fiddled with the telescope. She noticed Harry's glance, pulled out one hand and offered a wave. Harry sent a little smile back, and mouthed "Okay?" back to her. Hermione nodded with a little smile of her own.

"Nearly done, Harry, what's the next one?" Steven said, drawing Harry back to his work.

"Something called...Capella, in Auriga, it says."

"Right; a bit more east, then," Steven said, and checked the compass once more. He found it soon enough, and made his notes while Harry peered at the small white star.

"That one certainly is bright."

"It's the third brightest star in the northern celestial hemisphere, Mister Potter," Professor Sinistra confirmed from a few meters behind him. "You might want to note that down; it may show up on a test. When your charts are complete, you two may leave for the evening. Well done, Mister Wright."

"Thank you, professor," Steven said over his shoulder as Sinistra glided away. Steven returned to printing carefully on a folded bit of parchment. A few minutes later they had located their last item, an elliptical galaxy. They completed their assignment first that evening, wholly thanks to Steven's aptitude. They were in the process of packing up and folding the hinged, wooden tripod of the telescope when Harry happened to glance again toward Tracey and Daphne.

He caught Daphne's eye for the third time that night. She was bundled up as well in an elegant coat, hat and house scarf. Harry noticed she was pink-cheeked from the cold, but seemed to be enjoying herself. Daphne was waiting for a moment as Tracey studied something carefully through their telescope and drew little pictures on her notes. With a little smile, Daphne stepped closer and her eyes took in his open jacket, uncovered head, and bright green eyes.

"Brrr. Aren't you cold, there, Potter?"

Harry sent her a small grin. "Nope, all set here, thanks. You?"

"The heating charms have given up, I think; time for another." Daphne drew her wand from the pocket over her coat and gestured slowly down her front with an elegant spiraling motion. Harry saw a swirl of silver-orange magic slide around her form, and...his head tilted reflexively to the side, listening intently. Her magic...rang as it flowed, with a sound-feeling like liquid chimes. It was a quiet sound, as the spell was small, but something about it caught the whole of his whole attention, like four notes of perfect music. It was congruent

with the girl's radiance, he realized; both were elemental, simple, and elegant. Harry was staring again, which amused Daphne.

She smirked at Harry's tilted head and odd expression. 'He's sort of cute when he's confused.' She saw him blink twice, and then shake his head.

"Sorry...your magic—it's really...interesting," Harry said.

One elegant blonde eyebrow rose. "Oh? Do tell," she replied.

Harry thought quickly about how best to explain himself. "Er...hmmm," A light-bulb went off, and he said "Do you like music?"

"Some," she said with a sideways tilt of her head.

Harry nodded. "Well, how can you tell when you like a piece of music?"

Her brow furrowed at him. "I don't know...by the way sounds, or the feelings it evokes, I suppose."

"Exactly," Harry said emphatically.

Daphne's brow crinkled a bit more, wondering what he meant by that. "Wait, how is that—"

She was interrupted as Tracey Davis stepped into close proximity.

"Evening, Potter," Tracey said; Harry nodded back. Her eyes swung to Daphne, and she added "I'm done with Saturn, finally. All those bloody rings and moons; who knew?"

Harry addressed his next comment to Daphne. "Looks like you're back to work, then. I won't keep you from it."

Both of Daphne's eyebrows arched at that; he was running out on their conversation. "How very polite of you," she said in a dryly amused tone.

Harry tilted his head backward toward Steven, and said "I think my partner is well past finished, and is only waiting on me out of loyalty. I shouldn't test his patience any further." Harry glanced over his



shoulder at Steven, whose belongings were indeed packed, and now stood stargazing merely for the enjoyment of it.

"Well said, Potter," Tracey replied. "Come on, Daph, let's get this finished and get out of the cold, if you don't mind."

Daphne gave a long exhale. "Alright, I'm all for that."

Tracey turned back to the telescope. Daphne caught Harry's eye one more time and sent him look that said 'I know what you just did', but her eyes showed amusement as well. Harry sent her a little wave, and turned back to Steven and their combined pile of things. The two gathered their belongings, stopped for a brief word with Hermione and Lisa, and eventually made it indoors once again.

Once they reached the archway to the spiral staircase, Steven said quietly, but with mirth, "Flirting with the Slytherin girls, Harry? You DO like to live dangerously, don't you?"

Harry responded in a comical voice, "That's me, the Boy Who Lived Dangerously." Steven's laughter echoed off the tower walls as they descended back into the warmth and light of the castle.

After an abbreviated sleep the first-year Ravens soon found themselves yawning over their breakfast in the great hall. Caffeine was in great demand that morning at their end of the table. Harry had no problem getting up when the time came; he was accustomed to facilitating the Dursley's morning routine whether he'd slept well or not. Conversation was more sparse than usual, though.

Hedwig appeared with his post, which consisted of a wax-sealed scroll from Gringotts. Harry tucked the scroll away to read later, in private. Towards the end of the breakfast hour, Justin Finch-Fletchly stopped by the Ravenclaw table to deliver Harry's portion of the order from the stationers - a second basic fountain pen, three extra nibs, and a dozen little ink cartridges. Separately, he passed Harry a few coins' change from the order.

"You and Ernie are pleased your purchases, then?" Harry asked him.

"Oh yeah, very much so. My father uses a real pen occasionally, so I'd seen them around the house, you know—but Ernie hadn't. He's a

bit enthralled with his at the moment; he keeps signing everything within reach, and he's had it apart four or five times already."

They chatted until the five-minute bell rang, and parted company for the moment.

The Ravens dutifully trooped out for greenhouse one, albeit with slightly less vigor than usual.

As they neared the door to the greenhouse, Harry perceived a rather large magical radiance just inside the door, although the source was obscured by the semi-fogged windows and the plant-laden worktable against the wall. Since Harry, Hermione and Lisa were at the front of their group this morning, he got an unimpeded 'view' of the radiance of a large magical bear as they got to about five meters from the door.

"Remember the bear, and don't panic," he said quietly to the two beside him, and then turned to look at the Ravens just behind, and mouthed exaggeratedly to them the word "BEAR." Padma's eyes went wide for a moment, followed by a nod. Steven and Kelly beside her had caught on as well. Clarkson and Hammond were about four steps behind, and apparently missed Harry's tip-off.

Harry held the door for the girls; Lisa strode in first. Harry heard her say in a pleasant voice, "Good Morning, Professor," which Hermione echoed a second later. Padma and Kelly entered next, and bid their greetings also. Steven took the door from Harry's hand, and said, tilting his head backwards toward his two lagging friends, "I've got it, mate. You go ahead. This should be good."

With a shake of his head and a grin, Harry went in. The doorway itself was narrow so as to better keep the warm air indoors. Two large, deep tables lined the walls on either side of the door, forming a sort of walkway through which one had to pass in order to enter the greenhouse proper. As the table on his left was packed with meter-high plants, Harry could see virtually nothing on that side until about three meters into the building. Just beyond the table's edge sat the great brown bear form of Professor Sprout. The bear had a sort of grin on its face, complete with a lolling tongue, as she watched each of her students file in.

"Good morning," Harry said quietly with a nod as he passed. The great bear winked at him, a first for Harry. He strolled over to the classroom area and claimed a desk, but turned back to watch what he anticipated to be an amusing little tableau.

Steven was still holding the door, and quietly urging the other two to hurry up. Naturally, he let them jog through before himself. Hammond and Clarkson were perhaps a foot apart when they cleared the leafy obstacle on their left and came eye to eye with the very large bear. The results would be immortalized in Raven lore for the next seven years.

Hammond started so badly at the sight that he attempted to simultaneously stop, shout, leap away and reverse himself, with the result being that he tripped over his own feet with a half-formed yell. Clarkson was too close behind to do anything other than fall over Hammond, eyes wide in terror as he did so. One of them somehow lost a shoe in the resulting pileup. Clarkson was waving his arms and shouting "Bear! Bear! Run for your lives!"

Neither of them was doing any running at the moment, as they were both in a tangle on the greenhouse floor. The bear dropped onto all fours and pondered over to where they were tangled; two meters, then one meter. With wide eyes Clarkson took in the bear's hulking form and the mouth full of very large teeth. The bear huffed once in a low exhalation.

"Please don't eat me! Please don't eat me! Please don't eat me!" Hammond was chanting desperately over and over again, hands covering his head, eyes shut tight. "Eat him, he's bigger!" he said, indicating Clarkson.

The bear stopped a mere foot or so away from Hammond's prone form. It pawed at the loose shoe on the ground, hooking one large black claw through the loop of still-tied bow knot.

Harry perceived a chiming flash of magic and in the next instant in place of the bear stood Pomona Sprout, a shoe dangling from one fingertip. Clarkson merely stared, wide-eyed and open-mouthed. Hammond was still clutching his head with both hands, eyes screwed tight shut, rocking to and fro slightly.

"One of you seems to have dropped this," Sprout said with a winning smile.

Clarkson's jaw snapped shut. Hammond's eyes opened at the sound of her voice, and snapped left and right. Still clutching his head, he glanced upwards and asked "Am I really still alive?" The classroom broke into peals of laughter; even Hermione chuckled.

"Indeed, Mister Hammond," Sprout said with an impressively straight face. "Bears don't eat Ravens," she said, handing him back his shoe. She glanced over to the rear of her class, and added "...Snakes, on the other hand..." She let her words trail off, but their meaning was clear. Once again the Slytherin contingent had seated themselves in a solid formation at the right-rear of the room, and the Slytherin Draco-and-goons trio was once again seated together. Harry observed that right now, however, they were all looking rather sober-faced and a bit put out; perhaps she had surprised them in the same way before he'd arrived. The other five Slytherins were presently ignoring Draco and his minions like the plague.

Hammond was now vertical once again, and hopping on one foot as he attempted to pull his other shoe on. Clarkson still looked rather shell-shocked, but had also managed to stand and was shaking his head rapidly from side to side. The two staggered over and took seats, as Sprout started class a moment thereafter.

Class progressed, with the highlight being a bit of show and tell on magical versus non-magical orchids. By way of example, Sprout retrieved from a table two magnificent white orchids. Harry could see the fundamental living radiance of both plants, but the magical plant had an additional element literally weaving through it, a sort of white-pink colored strand of magic that coiled around the plant like a vine. Sprout devoted considerable time to enumerating the differences in the two varieties, and their uses in remedies and potions. Eventually they were given a homework assignment for the following week and dismissed. Harry found himself pleased to have a pretext to talk with Daphne once again, namely to deliver the catalogs they had previously discussed.

Harry quietly told Hermione and Lisa that he wanted to stay after and he'd meet them for Charms class in an hour's time. This earned him a raised eyebrow from Hermione, but Lisa merely nodded and

pulled Hermione along after her as she departed. The other Ravens with the exception of Steven were already gone when a voice Harry was hoping to have avoided called out to him.

"So, you're settled in, then Potter? Classes going well?"

Harry turned to look in Draco's direction; his goons hovered nearby, of course, as did a rather large girl with an unfortunate brow ridge. Tracey and Daphne had just begun moving towards the door, and Harry was hoping to time his exit with theirs. Chatting with Draco was not anywhere on his list of preferred pastimes. The two girls slowed when Daphne made eye contact with Harry. He met her glance and then cut his eyes meaningfully in the direction of the path they'd walked last time, hoping she'd understand the implicit request. He needn't have worried; Slytherin wasn't the subtle house for nothing. One corner of her mouth turned up slightly in a not-quite smile and her brows contracted subtly. All this passed in less than a second's time, which Harry would later remember to be rather interesting.

Harry glanced back at Steven, who was intentionally loitering behind so as not to leave Harry alone facing six Slytherins. Harry really appreciated that, truly. However, he believed the odds of trouble were small here, so he said, "Steve, why don't I meet you back at Charms in an hour?"

"Okay, if you're sure?"

"Yes, thanks."

Steven nodded at Harry, hoisted his bag and strolled slowly out, holding the door for Tracey, Daphne and the other girl with the prominent brow ridge as he went. Meanwhile, Harry had hoisted his own bag and approached Draco, but not too near.

"Yes, thank you, Draco. I'm finding the castle to be a rather special place. The older Ravens have been very helpful. And you?"

Draco seemed pleased to have the opportunity to boast. "Superb, of course. My family name carries a good deal of weight in Slytherin."

"No doubt, no doubt," Harry answered, even though he sort of DID doubt that.

"Have you given any more thought to what we discussed on the train?"

'Damn,' Harry thought. 'What WAS all that rubbish he went on about?'

"A bit, yeah," Harry lied. Pleased, Draco nodded.

"You're a Ravenclaw; do a bit of reading on it, why don't you," Draco said, and pulled a rolled up pamphlet from his pocket. He tossed it onto a desk between them. Harry glanced at it; the light yellow cover proclaimed 'Protect Your Magical Birthright!'

'Wow,' Harry thought, 'he actually brought propaganda.' To Draco he said, "Um... thanks. I'll have a read through it." Harry picked it up.

Malfoy nodded again. "Come talk to me after you have. You wouldn't want to inadvertently associate with the wrong types."

"Er...Right," Harry replied. Improvising, he added "Look, I don't mean to be rude, but I need to catch up to Tracey." Malfoy's eyebrow rose in question. On a lark, Harry said as he turned toward the door, "I owe her a Galleon; I lost a bet. See you all later." Malfoy and surprisingly even Crabbe nodded at that; apparently there was a fair bit of wagering in Slytherin.

With a mental sigh of relief, Harry left the greenhouse behind and marched quickly down the stone path he'd walked Tuesday, which he now realized was the long way 'round all the greenhouses. The weather was clear and crisp, and the fresh autumn air felt good. He found Tracey and Daphne lingering a just around the corner where the path passed under a large Silver Birch whose leaves had just begun to change. Daphne stood under it, and was making a show of collecting some of the brighter-colored leaves with her wand, floating them to down herself.

Tracey's posture seemed a bit annoyed. As Harry got closer, he heard her say,"—time collecting those ruddy leaves, for Daph? I mean, you can just charm them any color you WANT. Why bother pulling them off the tree? What can you possibly—" Tracey cut off as she saw Harry approach. Her eyes swung from him back to Daphne. "Huh."

"Hello, Tracey. This is for you," Harry said, handing her a Galleon.

"Hello, Potter—er, thanks. What's this for, exactly?"

"Officially? I lost a bet," Harry said with a half-smirk. "Hello, Daphne."

"Hello, Harry," Daphne replied, walking over to join them.

"Harry, is it?" Tracey said, looking first at Harry then at Daphne with raised eyebrows.

"Well...that's his name. He's not exactly anonymous," Daphne replied.

"True," Tracey conceded. "But you called him 'Potter' in Astronomy class."

Daphne rolled a shoulder in an elegant shrug. Tracey put it together then. She looked back toward the greenhouse, then at Harry, then back to Daphne, and said dryly, "If you wanted to wait for him, you should have just said so, instead of making me stand here and watch you collect pretty leaves."

"True," Daphne replied, tossing her handful of red-tipped leaves to the ground. "But keep that to yourself, please."

Tracey glanced back to Harry, whose eyes had a bit of mirth in them. She said, "Does this mean I get a galleon every time I cover for you two?"

"No!" Daphne said, just as Harry simultaneously said "Maybe."

Both girls smiled then, Daphne in amusement and Tracey in triumph. Harry said, "Correct me if I'm wrong, but there's no rule against students from different houses fraternizing?"

"No, there isn't," Daphne answered. "It's more of an anti-Slytherin bias."

"Shall we?" Harry asked, gesturing along the path. The three fell into a slow stroll along the looping path. "What does anti-Slytherin bias mean, exactly?"

Tracey answered. "We're seen as deceptive, ambitious and manipulative. The other students and even some of the faculty treat us that way, even though we've done nothing to deserve it," she said, indicating Daphne and herself. "Granted, the older Slytherins can be that way, but most of them got that way thanks to enduring years of suspicion and bias here."

"So you're saying the environment here perpetuates the behavior?"

Tracey nodded. "The older students basically told us we're going to be suspected of being devious and untrustworthy, just because we're in Slytherin. The prefects actually said to expect that bias from everyone outside our house, but especially from the Gryffindorks."

"Hmm. I have some experience dealing with people's pre-conceived expectations," Harry said.

Daphne's head tilted back at that. Tracey thought that over for a second, and said "I suppose you would, Potter."

"So over time..." Harry said, gesturing for her to continue.

"Exactly, over time the years of ill treatment add up, and pretty soon you become more devious, cold and manipulative out of self-defense, and because it's expected of you."

"A type of behavioral conditioning, then," Harry said.

"...I don't know what that is, exactly, but if it means anything close to molding children a certain way, then yes."

Harry nodded. "I'll lend you a book on it," he said.

"How very Ravenclaw of you," Daphne said with ironic humor.

Her voice drew Harry's thoughts back to her. 'Was her fate already written?' he wondered. 'Was she destined to lose that amazing radiance of hers, with her magic going dark and muddy like



Snape's? That should not be permitted to happen', Harry decided. 'One does not tar over a work of art.'

After a moment of walking in thoughtful silence, Harry remembered his promise and extracted the stationer's catalogs and handed them over to Daphne, pleased to have discharged that obligation.

"What's this? Oh, right. You remembered! Thanks," Daphne said.

"No problem. Ask Ernie MacMillan how he likes his new purchase," Harry said. Daphne nodded.

"What are we talking about now, exactly?" Tracey asked.

"Just mail-order from the stationers in Hogsmeade," Harry said. Daphne observed that his answer was both misleading and completely accurate. 'Clever... apparently he's got a bit Slytherin in him,' she thought.

"Right," Tracey said. "Don't tell me if you don't want to."

"I'll show you later," Daphne offered.

"Alright, then."

"So what did Draco want, Harry?" Daphne prompted.

From another pocket Harry produced the yellow pamphlet, and tilted it toward each of the girls in turn. "He's trying to persuade me over to his point of view about...things," Harry said. "I remain unconvinced."

"THAT," Tracey said heatedly, jabbing a finger at the pamphlet, "is Pureblood bigotry in print! Merlin, Potter, that stuff is awful!"

Her vehement reaction thoroughly surprised Harry. He tilted it back towards the girl on his left. "Daphne, do you concur?"

After a breath, she said "I do. It's hateful propaganda."

"That's three votes against," Harry said. With a twist of will he concentrated the heat around him into one small spot on the cover of the pamphlet, superheating it. The cover ignited, quickly

spreading. The analytical part of Harry's brain was pleased that he'd managed it in just a bit over one second.

Tracey emitted a little squeak and goggled at the sudden flame. 'Did he just...was that wandless magic?' she asked herself. She checked surreptitiously; Potter was holding his book bag with one hand and the pamphlet in the other. Daphne merely smirked at the display. Somehow, seeing Harry Potter perform wandless magic didn't surprise her much at all.

The fire quickly ate the pamphlet to ash. Harry stopped and dropped it onto a large stone at the side of the path. "Could one of you vanish that, please? I, ah... I don't actually know the spell yet."

The girls traded a look, and Daphne's amused smirk got a little larger. She drew her wand, waved it at the burned paper, and muttered 'evanesco'. Harry heard the bright, liquid chiming sound of her magic once again, closer this time, and clearer. It caused him to blink rapidly four or five times along with a sharp inhale. 'Wow. That will take some getting used to,' he told himself. He made a mental note to learn that vanishing spell, too.

"So much for that," Tracey said. She glanced at the other two, and they resumed walk. The castle loomed ahead now as the path curved toward it.

"If what you said about the bias here is true," Harry said, back on the previous topic, "...it takes root and grows. If you accept the role, then you're cast in the role for the next seven years. So logically, the sooner you show them you two are different, the better—snap people out of their usual thought patterns about you."

"Like exceptions to the rule, then?" Daphne asked, warming to the idea.

"Exactly", Harry replied with a nod. "The trick will be to not alienate anyone in Slytherin while you do it."

"Oh, that's easy," Tracey said. The other two turned to look at her as they walked. "We'll just tell them it's a scheme, and we're trying to avoid suspicion."

Harry nodded appreciatively, saying "Nice."

As they rounded the last greenhouse, Tracey said, "Ok, so how do we do this exceptions-to-the-rule thing, then?"

Harry thought for a moment, lip pulled to the side as he did. "Let me think on it. In the meantime, just be friendly. None of us first-years are properly indoctrinated to anything yet. Come study with us Ravens in the library after dinner—that looks self-serving, and I for one wouldn't mind the company. But not tonight, I have a detention after dinner." Daphne gave him a confused look while Tracey looked thoughtful. "Oh," Harry added, "want to join us on a little shopping trip at the end of the month?"

Tracey's eyes lit up. "When?" She asked.

"Where?" Daphne asked.

"We convinced our prefects to escort four of us—pending Flitwick's approval, of course—to the village of Dufftown, about ten miles away, for a shopping trip on the twenty-eighth. That's the seventh-year's free weekend."

"Interesting," Tracey said, tapping her chin with one finger. "What do you think, Daphne, it might be fun?"

Daphne looked thoughtful. "Isn't Dufftown entirely muggle?" she asked.

Harry answered, "According to Penny Clearwater, it is. She mentioned that Abelour—which is also nearby—had a few magical shops and was about the same size as Hogsmeade."

Daphne looked doubtful. Her few experiences in the muggle world with her parents had been brief and harried. Tracey gauged her mood correctly.

"Come on, Daphne...nothing will bite you. Besides, you'll have two prefects and the Boy Who Lived to protect you," Tracey said, adding humor to her voice for the last bit. Daphne looked at Harry, who bumped his eyebrows twice in response.

She cracked a smile and nodded. "Alright, then."

Harry smiled back, and looked to Tracey. "You didn't seem apprehensive," he noted.

She leaned toward Harry and said quietly, "My mum's a muggleborn witch. We go muggle shopping together sometimes. I even rode the underground once, and saw a movie. But keep that to yourself, please."

Harry's lip twitched in a half-grin. "I will do. But that's great, good for you, Tracey. Work on this one over here, will you? Tell her about the shopping," Harry said, indicating Daphne with a sideways nod of the head. Tracey smiled at that while Daphne rolled her eyes, a gesture Harry had not seen her use before.

Pleased, Harry said "I'll let you know what other ideas I come up with. Do you mind if I discuss it privately with one or two Ravens whom I trust? We'll need a few open-minded types in the mix, obviously."

Daphne and Tracey exchanged a series of rapid expressions in a silent conversation. Daphne finally said "Alright, Harry, but not more than one or two, and they need to be capable of discretion."

"Agreed," Harry answered. All three paused to watch an owl leave from the west tower, then proceeded into the castle entryway.

They reached the stairs, and Daphne sighed. "Well, I suppose we're off to Transfiguration. You?"

"Charms," Harry said.

"Right. Well thanks for these," Daphne said, waving the rolled catalogs.

"No problem. I'll see you later then."

"See you around, Potter," Tracey said.

"Bye Harry," Daphne said quietly, gracing him with a brief smile.

The two girls turned down the hall, while Harry started his climb upstairs to the Charms classroom.

Harry found most of the Ravens and Gryffs waiting in the hall outside the Charms classroom at five 'till eleven. The door was spelled shut, a barrier from what Harry could see. A loud flash-bang came from behind the door, followed by Flitwick's voice calling out 'Once again, Mister Corner'.

As he passed by Jeremy he asked, "Still alive there, Hammond?" This sent Steven and Richard into fits of giggles. Little did he know how oft-repeated this phrase would become. Harry stopped next to Hermione and Lisa, nodded toward the classroom and asked, "What's up in there?"

"No idea, but it's loud!" Hermione replied.

"H'llo Harry," Lisa said.

"Say, have you two had a chance to talk to Professor Flitwick about approving our little excursion?" Harry asked.

"We were planning to do that right after lunch, actually," Hermione replied.

"Let me know what he says, alright? I can plead our case again tonight, if necessary."

"Got another detention, Potter?" Lisa asked with humor.

"Yep. I accidentally turned his office blue, and now I have to fix it."

Lisa rolled her eyes at his highly improbable excuse. Hermione just looked at him with a furrowed brow, a question forming on her lips. Beside them, the door rattled loudly in its frame, then swung open. A pleased-looking Michael Corner stepped out, towering over all the firsties in the hall as he swept by.

"Come in, come in everyone, find your seats," Flitwick's voice said from inside the classroom. They entered to find Professor Flitwick magically reshelving a heap of books into the high shelves that lined the walls, mumbling about "—got a bit overzealous at the end, there..." as he steered three or four books at a time back to their places. The class filed in, the Ravens veering right and the Griffins left. Harry chose to put his beliefs into practice and follow Neville and Ron to the left side of the room today. This earned him some

odd looks until Lisa did the same, and then Steven. The room was well mixed now, which pleased Harry.

Neville offered a handshake and a greeting, which Harry returned. On Harry's other side, Ron Weasley leaned over to him and said quietly, "Hullo, Harry. If you're going to do anything massive, give me a bit of warning first, okay?" Harry tried very hard to not burst out laughing.

He kept a straight face, nodded and said "Sure, Ron." The redhead returned the nod and leaned back, visibly relieved.

Flitwick opened class with role call as usual, then with a review of their last homework assignment. When the time came for questions, Harry requested an explanation of the vanishing charm. There was general interest from the class, so Flitwick obliged and spent ten minutes on the execution of the charm, its limitations and variations, and a bit of the theory behind it. Apparently you were indeed sending the matter someplace else and replacing it with air, as Harry understood it. But where exactly did it go? He filled the two parallel columns of class notes & ideas in his notebook at a rapid pace that day, getting looks of curiosity from Weasley and Longbottom as he did so. Apparently Ravens wrote a lot more, about everything. Neither noticed Harry's wand held low at his side, tip touching the cool stone floor.

They revisited the hover charm, which initially made Ron nervous. Their task for the day was for them each to hover and control three apples simultaneously. The amount of focus required considerably greater than with a single object. Fortunately for him, Harry could see, and therefore guide, the columns of magic supporting his apples, and was among the first to master this variation. On a whim he tried five apples, and found that nearly impossible to control, regardless of how much power he used. He spattered one against the stone ceiling, making poor Ron flinch mightily. Four was manageable, but just barely, so he worked on that until he felt he had reasonable control of it. 'Power is nothing without control', Harry recalled reading in the Dueler's Handbook, and he believed they had the right of it. Across the room, Harry noticed Lisa had her three apples rotating in a smooth horizontal circle and weaving around one another. He gave a mental sigh. He ran through the different visualization techniques from the Dueler's Handbook. In the end,

just visualizing what he wanted and asking the magic to do it worked the best. 'Go figure,' he thought.

The next hour found Harry at lunch, talking once again with Terry Boot. Harry learned that you could indeed send and receive muggle post via a transfer box the magical post office in Hogsmeade, but Terry didn't know the details beyond that. Interested in knowing more, Harry called to Hedwig to him once again, and she appeared less than a minute later. He wrote out a quick note addressed to 'Hogsmeade Postmaster' requesting the details of sending muggle post through their office. Hedwig accepted it gracefully and soared out of sight. Harry reminded Lisa and Hermione of their four o'clock tea with Hagrid, and suggested they perhaps think of a few innocent questions they might ask while there.

The first-year Ravens had a free hour after lunch, which typically went to homework, reading or other studying. Harry had found himself a quiet table at the highest level of the Tower once again, and pulled out the scroll from Gringotts. Breaking the wax seal, he found a note in a short, angled hand which read:

Greetings Mister Potter,

Regarding your letter of 3 September, 1991: We thank you for your most excellent letter. Your answers follow:

Item One: Changing funds—Account holders may indeed change funds by mail. A 6% fee will be assessed for each transaction. You must provide the funds at the time of the transaction.

Item Two: Withdrawals—Withdrawals may be made in person only. Your Vault Key will be required. A Gringotts charge card is available to major account holders, of which you are one. Your identity will need to be verified in person before issuance of a charge card.

Item Three: Your accounts—There are indeed several Potter accounts that remain in trust for you. Specific account questions should be directed to your Account Manager, Griphook, at this location.

Item four: Arranging a meeting—as you are at Hogwarts, we can provide transportation upon request in the form of a round-trip

portkey on the day of your choosing. A ten galleon fee will be assessed for same.

May the spears of your enemies snap and their brittle bones break!

Sharptooth

Head of Major Accounts

Gringotts, London Branch

Harry smiled in satisfaction. He'd worked hard on his letter, adding the customary Goblin warrior-themed greetings and closings. On the advice of his book, he'd impressed the paper with the blood-soaked tip of a knife as one was supposed to do for official Goblin documents. Apparently, that was intended to convey you were serious. He thought it was perhaps a bit extreme, but Goblins in general seemed to go for the extreme. 'Sort of like Klingons,' Harry realized with a chuckle. Regardless, it had worked, and he had answers to some of his questions, and a path to more. He'd read about portkeys, of course, but had never used one. What would that be like, he wondered?

Thinking it seemed appropriate, Harry pulled the Gobbledegook text from his bag and began to read. Some time later, from far down below he heard a voice say "Still alive there, Hammond?" followed by a faint "yeah, yeah, very funny."

Harry read for another forty minutes or so until the five-minute bell apprised him of the time.

Defense Against the Dark Arts was officially Harry Potter's least favorite class. Quirrell's stuttering was as bad as ever, and the three Slytherin slackers were worse than before. Fortunately they bore no particular animosity towards Ravenclaw. Still, a wide gulf of empty desks was maintained between the two factions. Daphne and Tracey were sitting together at the front with a third Slytherin girl and one boy—Michael Cornfoot, Harry thought his name was. Draco and his goons had taken over half a row near the back, and Prominent Brow Ridge girl was sitting beside Draco today, Harry noticed.

The class became sort of a perverse endurance test for Harry and, he noticed, the other Ravens as well. They'd read the book, and



often others as well. They knew the material, and wanted a teacher who could make the subject matter interesting. Whatever Quirrell was, he wasn't that. Harry contemplated dropping the course, learning the material independently, and simply taking the exams. However Flitwick's admonishment rang in his head, so Harry gritted his teeth and sat through the class, wasting an hour of time he might be productive elsewhere.

The class ended without incident, and everyone shuffled out to their next class. He got a nod from Daphne as she went by, which made Harry a bit less morose.

Care of Magical Creatures class was interesting once again, with the highlight being the introduction both a young kneazle and a young crup to the class. Several of the girls fawned over the kneazle kitten, while Lisa took a liking to the crup pup. It made a sort of sense to Harry; these were the animals they were most likely to encounter in Wizarding homes. The crup was a bit hyperactive and ran up and down the isles, visiting everyone. This had the Ravens in a much better mood by the end of the class.

The four o'clock hour found Harry, Lisa and Hermione walking the long zigzag path to Hagrid's stone hut. Along the way, Harry learned that Professor Flitwick had approved their plan for a shopping trip to Dufftown, provided that both prefects agreed to chaperone, and provided that the first years obtained written permission from their guardians. Harry thought that Petunia would probably sign his, if he asked carefully.

A small garden and massive pumpkin patch comprised the remainder of the clearing. Smoke curled from the chimney, and Harry could perceive a magical presence inside, which from the size of it appeared to be Hagrid. Harry stepped up and knocked. A loud, deep barking rose from inside, followed by Hagrid saying

"Down, Fang, ye great brute! It's only Harry, I'll wager."

Harry heard a scuffling of nails on wood, and then Hagrid opened the door.

"Harry! Right on time, and with friends to boot. Well do come in, then. Welcome!"

"Thanks for inviting us, Hagrid." Indicating each girl in turn, Harry said "These are my friends Hermione Granger and Lisa Turpin."

"Hello, sir," Hermione said. "It's a pleasure to meet you officially." Lisa gave a little wave.

"Ah, call me Hagrid! Everyone does. I'm not a professor or anything. Take a seat, take a seat."

The three of them sat on mismatched chairs and stools as Hagrid set a huge cauldron onto a hook over the fire to boil. Harry took a moment to glance around the hut at the shelves lining the walls. Dozens of books on magical creatures of all types lined Hagrid's handmade shelves.

"Three young Ravens in my hut; it's been a while since that's happened, let me tell you." Hagrid lowered himself down onto a wide, oversized chair of stout hand-hewn lumber and said "So tell me, how are ye settlin' in? Classes goin' alright?"

Harry followed a hunch, and said "Professor Kettleburn started us on kneazles and crups today. Do you know much about them?" The girls grinned at the memory and Hagrid at the topic. In fact, Hagrid went on at some length about magical pets of all kinds until the tea was ready.

They chatted for another ten minutes after the tea was served, hot and black, with honey. Then Hermione said, "Hagrid, I had a question. Being a muggleborn, I'm not up on all my magical history."

Hagrid nodded for her to continue. "We're working on a puzzle, sort of a riddle, actually, and it describes a great hidden treasure. We were wondering what you thought the greatest magical treasure might be?"

"Hmmm...well, I... let me think. The biggest treasure's probably all the gold at Gringotts."

Harry was sort of anticipating that answer, and said "We thought of that, Hagrid, but it's not exactly hidden, is it? I mean everybody knows it's there."

"You've got a point, there, Harry," Hagrid said, and stroked his beard while he thought. "Hidden treasure, you say?"

Hermione nodded. She and Lisa were watching him keenly. "Somethin' from the founders of Hogwarts, possibly...it beats me, I'm afraid."

Harry said "We're pretty sure it's here at Hogwarts, Hagrid. What's the most valuable thing supposedly in the castle right now, would you say?"

Hagrid gave Harry a sharp look, and said "You three have no business looking for that, you'll get hurt! That's between Nicholas and Albus, that is."

Whatever Harry was expecting to hear, that wasn't it. The girls goggled at Harry as he looked wide-eyed at Hagrid. Hermione's very efficient brain processed what she just heard, and a moment later she said "When did Flamel come to visit, Hagrid?"

"Why, just a few—hold on, I should not have said that. I should not have said that..." Hagrid mumbled, shaking his head. The three Ravens traded glances among themselves. Hermione was wearing a grin.

Hagrid glanced at all of them in turn, and said, "Alrigh', look, you three. Professor Dumbledore is looking after somethin' of Master Flamel's. It's bein' very well guarded, believe you me. It's dangerous. Just leave it be. You don' need to know any more than tha'."

Harry glanced at Hermione again, and she twitched her head slightly towards the door. Harry sent back a sketch of a nod.

"Alright, Hagrid," Harry said, "Message received." Hagrid nodded firmly back at him. "May I ask you about something else?"

Hagrid, still a bit put out, said "What's that?"

"What's your opinion of Slytherin house?"

Hagrid sighed. He looked at Harry for a long beat, and then said "There's not a single witch or wizard who went bad who wasn't in

Slytherin, Harry." (A/N: from Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone)

"Really?" Harry asked.

"Yeah. Doesn't mean every Slytherin is evil, o' course; jus' means that all the ones who did go dark came out of that house. Why do ye ask?"

"Well, I met two first-years who think the whole castle is biased against them because they're in Slytherin. They're eleven! They aren't guilty of anything, as far as I know. They don't deserve to be treated with suspicion and contempt." Harry glanced briefly at Hermione and Lisa, both of whom were listening intently, considering themselves in that same situation.

"Ah...that's a hard one, Harry. When enough bad apples fall off a tree, you start suspecting maybe the tree's gone bad, understand?"

"I get it," Harry answered in a harder tone. "But tell me this, what happens if you raise a dog by kicking it and beating it every day?"

"It turns out mean and vicious, o' course...oh. I see your point, Harry. Hmm."

"I want to do something about it," Harry said.

"Like what?" Lisa asked. All three of them looked at Harry.

"I've no idea," Harry admitted, deflating a bit.

"You've got a good heart, Harry," Hagrid said. "An' a good head on your shoulders, too. An' friends to help," he added, glancing at the girls. "You'll think o' somethin'. Talk to Filius. You let me know if I can help, alright?"

Harry nodded. "Sure, Hagrid. Thanks."

Hermione mentioned wanting to go back to Ravenclaw before dinner, and that prompted the trio to wind up their conversations and say their goodbyes. Hagrid bid them goodnight with an invitation to stop back in a week's time for tea, or anytime just to talk. As they strolled back toward the castle, enjoying the late afternoon sunshine and the

relative privacy of the path, Hermione said "Harry, that was...unexpected. Were you serious about helping those two Slytherins?"

"Very. Would...ah, would either of you be willing to help me?"

"Help you do what, exactly?" Lisa asked.

"I don't know, really, just...be a group. Study together, maybe. Hang out."

"Be a group and study together—that sounds like a study group to me, Potter." Lisa had got it in one. Hermione's aura flashed brilliantly; Harry was pretty sure she liked the idea too. Harry stopped and looked at the taller girl.

"Lisa, that is perfect! You are brilliant," Harry said, and stuck up his hand for a real high-five. Lisa obliged, completing possibly the first ever high-five at Hogwarts.

"Go Team Potter!" Harry said exuberantly. Two pairs of female eyebrows went up.

"Hey! It was my idea—go Team Turpin!" Lisa retorted, making all three laugh.

After a moment, Hermione said "Ok, Team Granger would like to discuss what we just learned about the stone." Harry shot her a quick grin.

"Well, it's obviously here," Harry said.

"Agreed," Lisa put in.

"Agreed," Hermione concurred.

"It fits the bill for the 'greatest of treasures', seeing as there's only one, and it's priceless," Harry added.

"Yep," Lisa agreed. Hermione nodded.

"Any other alternatives leap to mind?" Harry asked.

"A founder's object; we've heard that mentioned a few times, and those are likely to be here at the castle as well," Lisa said.

"True... but what would they be?" Hermione said.

"No idea," Lisa answered.

"Me neither," Harry echoed.

Lisa said, "And that means - say it with me now..."

"Research!" all three said in unison. Hermione grinned at the humor. 'This is what having friends is like,' she thought happily.

There were two occurrences of interest at dinner; the first was that half a dozen people, at least, stopped by to ask Hammond if he was, in fact, still alive. The second was Harry's conversation with the seventh-year prefects Anthony and Penny wherein he stated his intention to start a study group for the first year students.

"That sounds useful, but why tell us?" Anthony asked, gesturing between Penny and himself.

"Er... I'd like you to speak, if you wouldn't mind." Anthony looked shocked, and Penny looked pleased but doubtful.

"I'm sorry, Harry, but I've got so much going on right now that I've barely got time for my own work, and sleep," he said.

"Same here, only worse," Penny added.

"I understand, your schedules are really full, I'm sure. Maybe you could come by once and give a little talk?"

"On what, exactly?" Anthony asked.

"I'd like you to talk to the first-years about your experiences in the muggle world, as a pureblood—what you did, what you saw, things like that. I want the younger purebloods and half-bloods to figure out they have nothing to fear." Anthony's head tilted back as he considered Harry's words.

Addressing Penny, Harry said "From you, Penny, I'd like to hear what you've learned over the last seven years about integrating into wizarding society, as a muggleborn witch. How you made the transition, and how you learned to straddle the two worlds. Nobody teaches that stuff; there aren't even any decent books on it."

"Wow," Penny said. "You've given this some thought, haven't you? Presenting both sides of the coin like that."

"I'd like them to hear it from you, so we don't have to reinvent the wheel with each new class of first-years. We'll pass it down, like tradition within the House."

"Better yet," Anthony said, "write a book. I'd buy it."

"Maybe YOU should write it," Harry said, "—Both of you, after you graduate. You could be fairly certain a large percentage of the future muggleborn students would buy it. And you already work well together." Anthony's eyebrows lifted as he considered that very sensible suggestion.

"Use us as your guinea pigs, then," Harry said. Penny laughed, while Anthony just looked confused.

"Sorry, muggle expression. Use us firsties as your test audience."

"Ah. Good. I like that," Anthony said. "I can find an hour or two a week, I suppose, but it will have to be on Saturdays."

"Excellent," Harry replied. "Penny? How about you each come on alternate Saturdays? That's two hours, twice a month. I'll get food brought in. Please?"

"You are a very persuasive young man, Harry," she said with a shake of her head. "Alright, you got me."

"Brilliant!" Harry said. "That's really brilliant, thank you both. I'll find a room, and we'll say—what, eight o'clock? Tea, coffee and pastries?"

Penny shared a look with Anthony, and then said "Alright, Harry. I'll be there."

Exceedingly pleased, Harry bid them goodbye and moved back down the table to tell the other Ravens what had just been arranged. Hermione and Lisa in particular were thrilled at the idea; Kelly and Steven seemed interested, and Padma merely amused at Harry's enthusiasm. Clarkson and Hammond agreed to show up 'for the food' when Harry gave them a rather pointed look.

After dinner, Harry once again hiked to Flitwick's office on the seventh floor. He found no spells on the floor this time, and only the usual ones on the door. He knocked and was bid to enter by a voice from within.

Harry did so, finding much of the office still chromatically blue. Flitwick was at his desk just finishing a long scroll of some sort.

/Geplach, Harry/ Flitwick said in Gobbledegook, without looking up.

/Geplach, Sitch/ ('Hello, Sir') Harry replied, trying it out for the first time. Flitwick grinned down at the scroll.

"Well done. Why don't you commence restoring my office, Harry, and tell me what's on your mind while you do so?" Filius suggested.

"Yes, sir." Harry set his bag down and walked to the wall nearest the door. He drew his wand and began with the lowest shelf, intending to work his way around the room. He drew the magic off the shelf itself, which promptly faded back to the color of oak. He went on to touch each book on the shelf, repeating the process. While he worked, he spoke. "I've been reading the Dueller's guide; parts of it are very helpful. I still haven't found the best way to focus all the extra power, though."

"Fine, we'll work on that later then. What else?"

"Sir, I'd like to start up a little organized study group for the first year Ravens. We plan to meet in an unused classroom, and possibly dragoon one of the older students into helping us as needed." Harry glanced over at Flitwick, who met his eyes and nodded.

"Sounds like a fine idea, Harry. You're to be commended on your initiative."



"Actually, it was mostly Lisa Turpin's idea, sir. I'll pass along your compliments. I'd like to request the use of a proper classroom for our study sessions, one of the disused ones if possible, sir."

Flitwick glanced up from his work to meet Harry's eyes. "Any special reason?"

"I'd like to invite some of the first-years from the other houses, the ones who are serious about learning, or who want help."

"So, a bigger group, then," Filius nodded.

"Probably, yes sir. Having a fixed time and place will make it feel more like a proper study club. I see us dividing up into groups, studying different topics and practicing magic in different parts of the room, as needed." As he spoke, Harry moved up to the second shelf, tapping one book and trinket at a time. He could feel the warm magic flowing back through the wand and up through his hand.

"Ah. Sounds eminently practical. I'll speak to Mister Filch about having a room made usable on the second floor of the west tower. Be advised, I'm holding you and Miss Turpin responsible for the conduct and safety of those attending. Any goofing off or serious injuries, and the room privileges will be revoked."

"I understand, sir. We'd like our first meeting to be this Saturday morning at eight."

Filius nodded and jotted down a note. "I'll see that the room's ready."

"If you want to come by, sir, feel free. I arranged for Penelope to speak to us for a bit on how a muggleborn can integrate successfully into the wizarding world."

Flitwick stopped writing and looked up. "Really?"

"Yes, sir. There's a real lack of knowledge on that topic—no books that I know of, in fact. So I asked her to speak to us."

Genuinely surprised, Flitwick said, "That's...excellent thinking. Your idea, I assume?"

"Yes, sir. I expect a dozen or more students, and I was hoping to provide refreshments, if you don't think the elves would mind."

"Ah. Hardly," Flitwick paused, and said "Tiggy!" A young female elf sparkled into the room a moment later. Harry observed a swirling pink radiance around her that settled as she clasped her hands behind her back and said, "You's calling, Professor Filius?"

Flitwick gave her a soft smile. "Yes, Tiggy. Mister Potter here," he indicated Harry with his quill, and Tiggy glanced towards Harry, who waved back, "...is having a special class on Saturday morning at eight o'clock. Can you please see that food and drink are delivered to the second floor of the west tower, room six?"

"Yes, Professor. Mister Harry Potter sir, what kinds of foods will you be wanting?"

Harry had stopped unspelling books for a moment at the mention of his name, and now responded to Tiggy. "I suppose just tea, coffee and some pastries, for a dozen or so people, if that's not too much trouble. Thank you, Tiggy."

"Oh, that's no troub—" Tiggy cut off in mid-sentence, and her large eyes went very, very wide. She smiled hugely, and said "It's YOU, Mister Harry, the stone-speaker! We hears you calling for your owl, we does. We knows the Voice when we hears it. Tiggy will be very pleased to help you, oh yes!"

Flitwick's eyebrows lifted almost to his hairline. Harry said, "Er... that would be great, Tiggy. Thank you. I'll see you later, then."

"Bye Mister Harry. Goodnight Professor Filius," Tiggy said, and disappeared with a snap of her fingers.

Flitwick looked at Harry. "Do continue, Mister Potter," Filius said.

"About that, or?" Harry said, gesturing to where Tiggy last stood.

Filius sighed. "It can wait, I suppose. Anything else on your mind?"

"Yes, sir. I understand you approved the idea for our little shopping excursion to Dufftown. That means a lot to us sir, thank you."

"You're quite welcome, Harry. Albus' only stipulation was the consent forms, which I agree with, by the way."

Harry, who had resumed unspelling books, nodded and said "Yes, sir. I wanted to invite you along if you wished to come, and to offer to bring you something back, if you have a favorite muggle snack or treat."

"That's very kind, Harry. I AM fond of those Chips-Ahoy cookies."

"Consider it done, sir. Also, I was wondering if we might take two other first-years along. They are feeling rather...unwelcome in Slytherin House, and I was hoping to befriend them, sir."

Flitwick looked up at that, then put his quill down and set the scroll aside. "Please expand on that, Harry."

Harry moved up to the third shelf, sighed, tapped the first book, and said "I'm on tentative but friendly terms with two of the first-year Slytherins. They have informed me quite vividly of the bias they feel is directed towards them simply because of their assigned house. I'm paraphrasing here, sir, but they believe that all the bias, suspicion, and distrust directed at them will change them over time into something cold, manipulative and deceitful, just to survive their years at Hogwarts. I refuse to let that happen, sir."

Flitwick was silent for long ten-count. Harry glanced back at him. In a quiet voice, the Charms Master said "That's a rather remarkable thing to say, Harry."

"Yes, sir. These two people I mentioned, sir, they're smart. They're not troublemakers. They need some friends, a peer group, not a whole school suspicious of them. They deserve a proper chance here!" Harry finished passionately.

"And you think you can do that?"

"I certainly can't fix anything in Slytherin house. But I can be a friend to two more kids my age, and treat them with courtesy and respect. And I can include them in social activities, so they know at least some of their peers like and respect them. I can't stop the tides of house politics, but I think that with a little help, I can build an island. Sir."

Flitwick took a long breath, and then said "That was very well put, Harry; and rather altruistic, I might add."

"I suppose, yeah. I mean yes, Sir. But I know something about running into pre-conceived expectations, and it can be difficult, sir."

Flitwick thought about that for a blink, and said, "I suppose you would."

Harry unspelled the rear wall, and continued: "I won't see two innocent girls abandoned to years of alienation and discrimination if I can prevent it. I want to see some kind of alternative to the roles they'll otherwise be forced to play. The sooner the better, in this case."

Flitwick's eyebrows lifted again, surprised once more by the young man in front of him. He found it odd to be inspired by a child, but not unwelcome. "You've given me quite a bit to think about, Harry. I shall support the travel request, in the interests of 'inter-house cooperation.' The same stipulation with the consent forms applies. Additionally, they will need to notify their head of house. That's what, six of you now?"

"Yes, sir. Three muggle-raised and three pure-bloods or half-bloods. I thought we'd pair off with one muggle-raised to each pureblood, so someone in each pair can act as a sort of muggle interpreter."

"Very clever. Three pairs is easier to keep track of than six individuals, certainly."

"Yes, sir. We'll keep it to about two hours' time, plus travel."

"Very good, Harry. You know," Flitwick paused, a smile growing in his voice, "...I haven't been muggle shopping in years. Perhaps I will come along with you."

Harry grinned at his professor, and said "That's excellent, sir! I suspect that will ease the minds of all concerned."

Harry moved to the far wall of the room and began once again on the bottom shelf. Filius folded his hands on the desk, studied the boy

for a moment, and said "Good. Now, what is this Tiggy said about you being a 'stone-speaker'?"

Harry sighed. "Well, sir, Hedwig is my owl. Some weeks after getting her, I figured out that I could get her attention, or call her to me, with a little pulse of magic."

Flitwick leaned forward in his chair. He'd not heard of such a thing before. The pitch of his voice rose a bit as he asked, "Really?"

Harry was focused on the shelf books in front of him, and didn't immediately notice his teacher's interest. "Yes, sir. It works fine in a non-magical building, or outside. Here in the castle, though, everything is so saturated with magic, "-Flitwick's eyebrows climbed higher, "...that the pulse is mostly blocked by the walls, and doesn't travel very far. So, I improvised."

Flitwick's natural curiosity was piqued; he did so love discovering new things. "Go on," he said with interest.

"I decided to try letting my little pulse of magic float on top of the spells in the walls, instead of trying to get through them - like oil on top of water, sir. I asked my magic to float on top of Hogwarts' spells, and seek out Hedwig. I used her name as the incantation, and it worked. She heard me in the Owlery, two towers over, and she showed up within a minute."

Flitwick was thoroughly animated now. "Really? That's rather extraordinary, Harry. I've never heard of such a thing. You invented a spell to call your owl, and then modified it to work at Hogwarts? You're sure her appearance was no coincidence?"

Harry shook his head. "If you open the window, I'll show you, sir," Harry offered.

"Yes, please," Filius said excitedly. He did so love seeing new magic for the first time. He waved a non-verbal spell at the leftmost window, which promptly swung inward despite having no hinges. Harry goggled briefly at that. 'I love magic,' Harry thought.

"Right," Harry said. "Here goes nothing." He placed his hand lightly on the exterior wall of the office and slid a trace of power into his voice. He gathered more magic in his hand, and asked it to skate

over Hogwarts' own magic and find his owl. He visualized Hedwig clearly in his mind, and said quietly, "Hedwig, please come to Flitwick's office." He let the magic loose and it shot away, a faint blue pulse rippling over the golden radiance of the outer wall.

Filius' sharper-than-human hearing heard the overtones and low harmonics in Harry's voice. Even at quiet volume they were rather impressive. Harry lifted his hand from the wall.

In his normal voice, he said "That's it, sir. Now we wait."

Forty-five seconds later a large snowy owl appeared in his window, came through, and settled on Harry's outstretched arm. Filius was suitably impressed, clapping his hands with glee. "Well done, Harry! Well done, indeed. That's marvelous!"

Hedwig turned an amber glance on the diminutive professor. Harry said, "Professor Flitwick, this is my familiar, Hedwig."

Flitwick's brows arched again. "Familiar, is she? That explains a bit of it, then. I doubt you could call any owl in such a fashion."

"I really don't know, sir. Is there another owl you wish to see?"

"Hmm...yes, try calling my owl, Franklin. He should be in the owlery as well."

Hedwig bobbed her head at that, which amused Harry. "You saw him there, girl?"

Hedwig clicked once in response, which Harry knew to mean yes. Flitwick was mildly surprised once again; he had seen this level of communication between wizard and familiar before, but only rarely. This boy was certainly not boring.

Harry repeated the spell, and in the owlery a large black horned owl started awake at hearing its name rippling through the stones beneath his feet. The Voice said: 'Franklin the owl, please come to Flitwick's office.' Franklin shook his head rapidly to clear it. The owls around him were giving him very strange looks. Why had the Voice summoned him, exactly?

Franklin took off in three large wingbeats and soared up into the late afternoon sky. Moments later, Filius was both surprised and impressed by the arrival of his own owl. Franklin alit on the window sill and then crossed to the back of the vacant chair near Flitwick's desk.

"Hello, Franklin," Filius greeted him, receiving a hoot in reply. He held out a sealed scroll to the owl and said, "Take this to Bonebreaker at Gringotts, please." The owl gave another hoot and extended a leg for the scroll to be affixed. The bird eyed Harry curiously while waiting, and click-whistled at Hedwig in a short string of noise. Hedwig inflated her feathers and sent back a longer string of click-whistles. Through their developing bond, Harry caught the mental image of himself in her thoughts, and the stones under her feet in the owlery. Harry supposed that was because they were in physical and magical contact just then. Franklin tilted his head in response, but did not reply. Professor Flitwick finished tying the scroll and stood up, extending a hand to offer Franklin a lift, and carried his owl to the window. Franklin looked once again at Harry and Hedwig, then at Flitwick. He hooted once in farewell, and launched himself out of the window, bound for London.

Flitwick took a moment to look at Harry with the great white owl perched on his arm. He said, "Hedwig may stay if she wishes; she can use Franklin's perch." He indicated a meter-high perch of dark, polished wood. Harry carried her over to it, and she stepped gingerly from his arm onto the perch.

"Nearly done with the color reversals, I see; that's fine."

"Yes, sir, just the top shelf here, and the ceiling itself. I might need a hover for that one, sir."

"No time like the present. Up you go!" Flitwick swished the spell at Harry, who began to float. Amused and a bit off balance, Harry laughed as his professor gently hovered him up toward the ceiling. In another second he was there, able to reach the stones and cancel his previous spell. The stone faded back to gray once more, and Flitwick lowered him slowly back down.

"Thanks!" Harry said. "First time I've done that, sir. It's a rather odd sensation, like a geyser of water supporting you."

"Indeed, Harry, indeed," Flitwick replied with amusement. "The hour is getting late. Leave the remainder for another day. Let us work on some spell control, shall we? My own mentor showed me this exercise..."

Flitwick went on to explain a series of drills to Harry, what he called micro-magic, working on the smallest items one had handy - pebbles, knuts, or small candies like jellybeans. The idea was to learn fine control by taking the power requirement out of the equation almost entirely. Flitwick reviewed the multi-hover spell, along with a few color-change spells, a tiny heating and cooling charm, and the bubble charm, which he explained was handy for containing nearly anything temporarily - not just air, but, noise, smoke, and even liquids. He then added the water-conjuring charm 'aquamenti' to increase the difficulty of the drills, tasking Harry with conjuring little hollow spheres of magic, hovering them, filling them with water, then changing their color. That was two applied and two maintained charms used in concert, Harry realized. Naturally, Flitwick demonstrated the end result with skill and ease, quickly crafting a half dozen little floating colored spheres.

"This will take practice, coordination and control, Harry, but no great deal of power. Oh, and incidentally," He waved a bright yellow one away from the others, and let it drop to the floor, where it made a paint-like splotch, "they can make quite a mess. This will give you an opportunity to practice your cleaning charm afterward," he said with a small grin. Harry grinned back; he knew a magical paintball when he saw one. He'd have to learn the banishing charm so he could send them at...yeah—needed a banishing charm, post haste.

Flitwick checked his pocket-watch; they'd been at it for nearly eighty minutes. His office was mostly restored, except for one shelf full of books and trinkets that were still resolutely blue. Half a dozen colored splotches now colored the floor and shoes of his most interesting new student, while four spheres danced around the tip of his wand. He had the distinct feeling this young man was going to be a force to be reckoned with, and he wanted to be around for it.

From behind his desk, Filius said "Ten minutes left, Harry. Do you have a preference for how you'd care to spend it?"



Harry vanished the four spinning globes and the mess at his feet. "Yes sir. I was wondering if you could tell me a bit about my parents' time here at Hogwarts?"

Flitwick blinked at that. He sighed, and answered "Of course. Take a seat." He gestured to the guest chair before his cluttered desk. For the next ten or twelve minutes, he told Harry more than anyone else ever had about James Potter and Lily Evans.

Harry departed with much to think about and much to practice. He unknowingly left Filius in a similar situation, pondering the great changes the small boy was intent on making to the fabric of life at Hogwarts. Filius was sure things hadn't been this interesting in a decade, at least.

#### Author's Notes:

1- Star Trek: TNG premiered in 1987, so Harry had some time to catch a few episodes. My Harry would have.

2-In Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone it states that Hagrid's hut is made of wood, but in the films it is made from stone. Or possibly he upgrades at some point when he's promoted to a teaching position.

3- Harry's magical voice is not the Dune/Bene Gesserit voice, but something more magical/musical.

4- Managed to get a day into one chapter. Things will speed up more as the routine is now mostly established.

5- In case any FF staff are reading this: fix the sodding file uploader, please! It keeps crushing letters and words out of my uploads.

## CH17: Plans, Teams, Snakes and Dreams

After his Thursday night tutoring session with Professor Flitwick, Harry spent a good three hours on classwork, reading, and revising into his two concurrent notebooks. The one for ideas and theories was nearly half full already, whereas the one for revised class notes was barely twenty pages in. That said a lot about how his week had gone. While lying in bed he'd run through the occlumency exercises again, which he found made memorization faster and easier. He then read another section of the Gobbledegook text, this one on basic vocabulary. Flitwick was right, it was definitely not easy. The pronunciations were all notated precisely, but were still challenging to actually form; who knew there were six different kinds of growls used as verbs? Fortunately Flitwick had charmed the words to actually speak when you pressed them, so Harry had some idea of how they should sound.

The half-six morning chime woke a sleepy Harry Potter. At some point his dream of growling Goblins had become the pleasant airplane dream again, and Harry didn't really want it to end. For some reason he was flying without the plane this time; he could feel the wind rushing around him like a tangible thing as he glided through the sky, looping over the school, the forest, the black lake. When the chime intruded, the dream had shimmered away. Harry only remembered snatches of it now, but he recalled really liking it - the solitary sky, the stars, the freedom, the speed; it all felt very right to him. Harry supposed he was dreaming of flying a broom for the first time, which was on their schedule for this afternoon; at least that's what Harry assumed was meant by 'Flying lessons'.

He considered his plan for the day as he showered. Fridays were split days for the first-years, with the mornings being occupied by a two-hour History of Magic class, and the afternoons with an hour of Divination, followed by 'Flying lessons', which occurred once a week until the winter break.

As he dressed for the day, he noted with amusement that all of Clarkson's possessions were violently pink, including the pile of clothes he'd set out. Even his sheets and bed hangings were pink. Hammond was certainly thorough, Harry had to give him that. How he'd managed it with Richard asleep in the bed, Harry wasn't exactly sure. Harry was just walking out the door when he heard Hammond say loudly, "Up and at 'em, Richie, breakfast in fifteen minutes!

Flying lessons today!" A loud shout of surprise wafted down the staircase moments later, and Harry grinned.

Three of the four Raven first-year girls were there, as were Steven and Wanda, the former of which was talking animatedly to Terry Boot about something. Lisa looked a bit sleepy, sipping a steaming something from the lid of her ever-present thermos. Hermione noticed him approaching and turned in his direction. They exchanged pleasantries, and then Hermione asked,

"So what did Professor Flitwick say about the study group?" She was practically bouncing on the balls of her feet with anticipation.

Harry said happily, "He approved it. We're to have our own room on the second floor. The Study Club is open for business."

"Brilliant! That's great news, Harry."

Harry bumped his eyebrows once, and said, "The first meeting is tomorrow morning at eight, obviously, for Penny's lecture. We've got catering and everything," He added with a wide grin.

"Really? Well done, Harry, that's brill. How did you manage all that?"

"Honestly? I asked," Harry replied. "Professor Flitwick was very accommodating. He saw the value in the idea right away, and the elves are thrilled to provide hot drinks and pastries. Have a little sleep in tomorrow if you like, and take your breakfast at the meeting."

"Sounds lovely. I'm looking forward to it."

"Please invite any other muggle-born or half-blood students -anyone with muggle ties, really - to Penny's talk tomorrow. I think we'll keep the Study Club itself a bit more exclusive for now."

"I will do, Harry. Thanks so much for organizing this," she added.

Harry shrugged one shoulder. "It's a joint effort as far as I'm concerned. By the way, Anthony will be lecturing next Saturday about his experiences as a pureblood taking excursions into the muggle world; sort of the other side of the coin, if you follow me. You

might want to tell anyone you know from that side of the fence to show up for his talk, as well."

Hermione had caught on absurdly quickly to Harry's plan. She fixed him with a look and said, "That's spot on, Harry. Good thinking. Building bridges, are we?"

Harry shrugged again. "Just relieving ignorance, mostly, and trying to help people understand each other. "

"Does this have anything to do with those two," -she mouthed the word 'slytherins', "-you mentioned ?"

Harry nodded his head sideways. "Not specifically, although I intend to invite them. Actually, I want to hear what Penny has to say for my own knowledge. I've only got a rough mental sketch of how the magical world actually works. You'd have thought someone would have written some sort of introductory guide for muggleborns, but I couldn't find anything in print."

Hermione nodded in understanding. "I feel much the same," she said. "And I know Lisa does, too."

"I'm certain most muggleborns would, or muggle-raised kids like me. Your get tossed into a whole new world, without a map. It's disconcerting!"

They were both distracted briefly by the sudden progress down the staircase of a single bright pink oxford shoe, size ten, as it clattered down the stairs and rolled to a stop. Hermione tilted her head and squinted at it, heard the renewed shouting from upstairs, rolled her eyes, then looked back to Harry.

"Hence this seminar, or lecture series, whatever you're calling it," she said.

"Exactly; I want us to benefit from her experience, and we can pass it down to the next group of firsties. We'll make a Raven tradition out of it; knowledge transfer and all that."

"That's pretty huge, Harry. You recognize that, right?"

"...Maybe," he said with a frown. "We'll see how it goes, and maybe do a few more follow-on lectures. I'm not advocating for a full Magical studies course, or anything."

"Hmmm...that's not a bad idea." Hermione replied. "I'd like to know a bit more about how the magical government works; a lecture or two could summarize that."

"I see where you're going...government, politics, law," Harry ticked them off using his fingers, "...maybe economics, manufacturing, healthcare, the press, and sport. All the significant aspects of magical society."

Harry glanced up to see Hermione staring intently at him. The magic was swirling so fast around her it was making him dizzy just looking at it. Bands of color rippled through her silver aura at a hyperbolic rate. She appeared to be breathing rather fast as well, Harry noted.

"All of that," she said quietly, but then her voice began to rise in volume. "I want - We need to understand bits of all of that! I want to be prepared for a life this world, and they don't bloody well teach any of that at this bloody school!" she said heatedly. Her arms crossed defensively. "So much for preparing us for our futures!" She added. Magical sparks were dancing through her wild hair. Her narrowed gaze was practically throwing sparks too, Harry noticed. Silver magic had surrounded the caramel of her eyes in Harry's vision. He rested a hand to her shoulder, bringing her fierce gaze back to him.

"We'll figure it out, Hermione - that's what we do. This is a school, after all. We want to be taught. Let's see how much of what we want can be had for asking, alright? Let's see what's possible."

"And if they decide we're a minority, and not worth the trouble?" She asked in a sharp tone, looking at the floor once more. Miniature lightening crackled visibly through her auburn mane.

Harry spoke very quietly and sincerely to her. "If we are, then we are, Hermione. We'll get what we can here, and find the rest elsewhere. We'll pool our resources and find tutors if we have to. But there's always a way, believe me. Where there's a will, there's a way." Her eyes lifted to his just then. Harry saw reflections of his own drive to

succeed, the fear of failure, a longing to fit in, and a wish to belong somewhere; but most of all, the desire to understand.

Hermione was in fact feeling partly angry for the large gaps just revealed in their education, partly despondent about it, partly excited at the possibilities he just mentioned, and partly amazed at the certainty in the vivid green eyes staring into hers. How could he just...change things? Where did that come from? Is that what a leader does?

Harry tipped his head down to look over his glasses at her, and said "Do this for me, please, Hermione. First, take a deep breath - your magic is swirling like crazy right now." She started a bit, then did so. Harry nodded. "Good. Let's go get you a cup of tea and some food. Afterwards, please write down what we mentioned, the things you want to see taught to students of non-magical homes. Then you, Lisa and I will present it to Flitwick and McGonagall. We'll need to make the case for it being taught here, alongside other magical disciplines. It may not become a class, but I think we can get some voluntary seminars organized, at least."

"You really think so?" she asked, guardedly hopeful.

"I think we can try. I can be somewhat persuasive, you know." Hermione gave a near smile at that. "I have a rather large backlog of celebrity; perhaps I'll put a bit of it to use. At a minimum, we run our Study Club meetings and have guest speakers on the topics we want to learn."

Hermione nodded to him. "I'll put some ideas down on paper, and we'll talk about it with Lisa."

"I agree," Harry said. "Now lets go eat, yeah? I'm starving." Hermione gave him a little nod back.

They turned and saw Lisa, Kelly and the lately arrived Padma watching them avidly while trying to appear not to be doing so. Harry smirked at Wanda & Steven, who just shook his head at him.

"Alright," Harry said in a louder tone of voice, "We have No Clarkson, and no Hammond. It's five to seven. I vote we depart. All in favor?" All six hands and one little fin rose. "Splendid. Let's eat!" Harry and Steven led the others to the door, where Harry held it open for the

girls to pass through while Steven & Wanda led the procession down the stairs.

"Way to take charge, Potter. I must not be awake yet," Lisa said with a friendly punch in the arm as she brought up the rear of the line. Harry was now pretty sure she could throw a better punch than he could, if it came to it.

"No problem," Harry said to her back. "Hey, speak to Hermione, please. She'll fill you in."

"Fine," came her voice from half-way round the spiral stair.

Harry was enjoying his first cup of tea at breakfast when he was put into a coughing jag by Padma, of all people. She had greeted the late-arriving Hammond by asking in her very best elocution "Still alive, there Jeremy?" Even Hammond grinned at the unexpected source of the humor. Clarkson showed up moments later, wearing a black robe four sizes too small over bright pink trousers, shirt, tie, and shoes. Even his nails were pink. Padma and Lisa fawned over him in comic excess. The jokes were varied and plentiful, but to his credit he laughed at most of them himself; a good sport, was Mister Clarkson.

After some minutes of peaceful munching, Harry made the general announcement regarding the voluntary Study Club, which was well received by the other Ravens as a chance to cooperate on assignments, practice magic, and get some tutoring if needed. He rightly gave credit for the idea to Lisa, which left a pleased smile on her face. Harry specifically mentioned that other first-years from every house were to be invited, and he indicated he planned to personally invite three or four.

He went on to confirm that this coming Saturday they would indeed have a 'special guest speaker' give a talk to the club on the topic of 'integrating into Magical society'. The Ravens responded well to learning the speaker was their own prefect, Penny Clearwater. Food and drinks would be served, and the Ravens were to invite anyone 'who could behave themselves' and whom they thought might be interested in that Saturday's topic. Students with a muggle connection were especially to be welcomed. This news was met with a mix of keen interest and discrete skepticism, Harry noted, and a lively discussion ensued around the table.

The morning mail delivery came not long thereafter, and Harry received a reply from the Hogsmeade postmaster via an ancient looking grey Horned Owl. The included form letter detailed the procedures and rates for sending and receiving muggle post through the wizarding post office. Apparently, they even sold Royal Mail stamps to wizards who needed them. Harry was pleasantly surprised at how organized the postal system was.

As he was finishing his second helping of eggs, the deputy Headmistress approached their table and said, "Mister Potter, please come to my office at four-fifteen this afternoon. You will find it on the first floor of the Defense tower. Do be on time please."

Harry was at a bit of a loss, but answered "Yes, Professor." She gave him a terse nod and made her way over to the next table in search of another student. Hermione simply looked at him from across the table with two raised eyebrows, inviting an explanation. Harry shrugged, but had a brainwave just then and said to Hermione, "You might as well come along. We'll plead our case for seminars, and see what happens." Hermione's eyes went a bit wide, but she nodded enthusiastically right after. Harry saw her put her head together with Lisa and the two began talking fast about what he presumed was a list of ideas.

Harry downed the last of his tea, excused himself and strolled over to the Hufflepuff table. He greeted Ernie and Justin, chatted a bit, and admired Ernie's rather bright blue pen, about which the boy was still over the moon. Harry told them about both the Study Club, for which they immediately saw the benefit, and the Saturday lecture, which predictably interested Justin. Harry mentioned the future one to be given by Anthony, and Ernie's interest piqued at that. Harry asked them to spread the word on the lectures. Harry then made his goodbyes and paid a similar, but more jovial visit to the Gryffindor table.

Fred and George had somehow spelled everyone's hands to be reversed, so their thumbs stuck out where their pinkies should have been. It made properly holding a utensil next to impossible. This proved rather hilarious to watch, in Harry's estimation. He repeated his announcements and got some interest in the Study Club from Neville, Seamus, and Parvati. Harry was surprised by the enthusiastic response to the idea of pureblood-themed Saturday



lecture, which made sense in hindsight; there weren't many muggleborn in Gryffindor right then. Harry decided walking over to the Slytherin table would be unwise, so he concluded a letter to Daphne would be best. He turned sideways a bit in his seat next to Neville, and leaned over to touch the floor. This drew a few odd glances from Neville and Ron just past him, and from the twins across the table.

"What are you-"

"-doin' there, Harry?" they asked in twin-speak. It was a trifle odd to see a firstie pressing on the floor like that.

Harry straightened up to reply, and said "I'm calling my owl."

Snorts of humor ensued, and Neville's eyebrows rose.

"You're having-"

"-us on, Harry. You can't-"

"-call an owl like that!"

"Mail delivery -"

"-is done for the morning..."

"anyway." the twins finished together.

Harry was thinking he might as well enjoy this. "Bet me a galleon. Each," he said, looking first at one twin, then the other, "That I can't call my owl and have her show up in under a minute."

Ron shook his head, and said to his brothers between bites, "Don't do it."

The twins exchanged a look.

"You're on, Harry!" Fred said.

"Same here!" said George.

"Fine," said Harry. "We'll need a timer, I suppose..." he added, glancing around.

"Allow me," Fred said, and conjured a small hourglass right in front of Neville.

"Neville, you do the honors", Harry said. Amused, Neville lifted the little timer, glanced at Harry, who nodded, flipped it over quickly and said 'Go!'

Harry lent back down and placed his hand on the floor as he ran through the process of pooling magic in his hand and voice. He added a bit extra on the Voice today, and let a little bit of blue and silver magic seep into his eyes as well, purely for effect. After five or six seconds, he said

'HEDWIG, Please come to the Great Hall.' and let the pulse of blue magic flash away, skimming over the stones of Hogwarts.

Neville Longbottom watched Harry Potter slowly lift his hand from the floor and straighten up. Effervescent flecks of bright blue magic swirled upwards from two disconcertingly green eyes. He felt his jaw slacken and his own eyes go wide at the sight of that. To see that on top of the remarkable voice he'd just heard come out of the boy beside him! It sounded like five people speaking, Neville thought, and at least two of them were really, really big - like Hagrid big.

Fred and George were also rather impressed at what they'd just seen. They traded a look and entertained parallel thoughts as their jaws hung loose. They'd just witnessed not just wandless magic, and from a first year no less, but an unknown, presumably invented spell. And that voice! They'd heard stories of wizards using voice magic like that, of course, but never had they heard it for themselves.

The only person not thoroughly surprised was Ron Weasley, who had continued eating his scramble right through Harry's little display, gripping his fork like a toddler to eliminate the need for absent thumbs. In Ron's mind, this was Harry Potter, who'd literally done the impossible. The usual rules didn't apply to him, and you'd be a fool to bet against him. It was obvious, really.

Harry swiveled back into place beside Neville, and confidently picked up a glass. He poured himself an orange juice, sipped it, and waited. Twenty seconds went by, then thirty, then forty.

Harry felt Hedwig's radiance enter the south end of the Great Hall, and he knew he'd won the bet. He extended the arm opposite Neville out over the conveniently empty seats beside him. Hedwig looped once overhead and glided to a graceful stop on Harry's outstretched arm. 'I do so love it when a plan comes together!' Harry gloated.

"Gentlemen, meet Hedwig, my owl and familiar."

"Blimey, Harry," Neville said.

George smiled, then shook his head, and said "Fred, I do believe we have just been schooled."

"I do believe you're right, brother mine. Quite appropriate, really-" Fred replied.

"-Since we're at school," George finished. Neville snorted at that.

"Told ya," Ron said. The twins looked at him narrowly, then back at Harry. Two galleons were passed over, which Harry happily pocketed.

"She's a beautiful bird, Harry."

"Thanks, Neville."

"Say, Harry, any chance of learning that spell?" George asked in a carefully casual tone. That was the line Harry had been waiting for.

In an equally casual tone, Harry replied "How about we trade a little know-how, gentlemen? There are a few things I wouldn't mind knowing..."

The twins traded a look. Fred said "I think we can do business, young Harry."

"How about tonight, say half-five? Meet in the Charms classroom?"

"See you then!" George said, and they shook on it. The twins excused themselves from the table to catch up with their friend Dean, who'd just gone by with a rather large, plain brown box with air-holes poked in it.

Harry diced an apple and placed it in front of Hedwig, who had hopped down to the empty stretch of table beside him. Then Harry extracted his pen, thought for a second, and wrote out a quick note to Daphne that read,

D ~

Previously discussed plans approved. Dedicated, safe place obtained. Special event tomorrow 8AM, west tower, room 6. Do bring T ~ would regret missing it.

Please come. Talk more then.

~Firestarter

Harry believed that to be sufficiently cryptic so that anyone reading it would not readily deduce her identity, or his, or their agenda. He rolled the note tight, handed it carefully to Hedwig, and bent close to whisper instructions to her. She listened carefully, and bobbed her head when he asked if she understood. They shared a forehead-rub, and then Hedwig launched herself up and out of the great hall into the bright morning sky. Harry collected his things and left the hall, chatting with Ernie as he did.

She circled above the roof of the great hall once as instructed, then glided back in and over to the Slytherin table, where she found the girl whose name her wizard had whispered to her.

Daphne Greengrass was surprised to receive a mail delivery that morning, and even more surprised to see an elegant white owl carrying the message. The bird circled over her head once, drawing several curious glances from the table, then alit on the empty bench beside her. Tracey leaned over to look past Daphne in curiosity.

"That's quite an owl," Tracey observed.

"Indeed," Daphne replied. Then to Hedwig she said "You're a beautiful owl, aren't you. Is that for me?"

Hedwig bobbed her head twice, which amused both girls. Hedwig released the little rolled note from one long-taloned foot and took one step back. Daphne carefully reached out and took the note. "Thank you," she said to Hedwig, who clicked back twice, and launched herself silently into the air once more. The girls watched her soar up through the rafters of the great hall and out into the sky beyond. Daphne carefully unrolled the note in her lap and read it beneath the table.

"Who's it from?" Tracey asked in an urgent whisper.

"Our firestarter," Daphne answered in an amused tone.

"Who-oh. Well, that's clever, at least," Tracey said, reverting to normal voice.

With a little smile, Daphne replied "Isn't he, though?" She re-read the note, then added "So Tracey, what are your plans for tomorrow morning?"

Harry arrived a bit early for his first History of Magic class, with the Ravens shared with Gryffindor. He had heard from Ernie that an actual ghost taught this class, and he was interested to see what that might be like.

Boring, that's what it was like: mind-numbingly, stultifyingly boring. The ghost of Professor Binns had a monotone voice that could quite possibly bore you to death if you listened long enough. Harry tried, he honestly tried to focus on what the old ghost was saying, but the ghost could make explosions seem dull. He didn't even try to make his overview sound interesting. Twenty minutes in, Harry noticed a very odd slant in the lecture material; it focused exclusively on things that happened more than 200 years ago, and focused on political revolts and rebellions rather than, you know, magic. By the second hour, Harry had noticed that a good ninety percent of the class was bored senseless and no longer taking notes. Students were nodding off; some were reading or doing other work. Still the ghost droned on, oblivious. You could replace him with a record player, Harry thought.

Ten minutes more passed, and Harry was in fact getting rather annoyed; he actually wanted to learn the history of Magic: Merlin and Morgana; the founding of Hogwarts; why the magical secrecy

act became necessary; and about ten more things that leapt to mind. Sighing inwardly at the irony of the situation, Harry took his own advice and began writing out what HE wanted from a history of magic class. He was pretty sure his wishes were fairly representative of the Ravens in general, and probably the rest of the first years as well. After a few minute's revising he had a fairly good list in front of him. There were a bit more than five minutes left in the class, Harry guessed, and their ghostly professor was wrapping up his lecture. Harry's temper was stewing a bit. His left hand gripped the side of the desk a bit tighter as his indignation grew. Unconsciously he started moving heat through the desk, just leaking it out of his hand as the ghost droned on. Harry was waiting for the opening he hoped would come.

Finally, the ghost of Binns said in his echoing voice, "that concludes... ..today's lecture... Your next..assignments...are on...the board. Are...there any...questions?"

Harry's raised his right hand; he was the only one to do so. Hermione gave him a 'You have GOT to be kidding!' look from the next chair, which was almost worth the previous two hours of mental anesthesia.

Binns looked up, and actually appeared surprised at seeing a student's hand raised. "Yes...Mister...Palmer?"

Harry noticed the error on his name, but let it go in favor of asking his intended questions. "Thank you, sir. I was wondering if you planned on us covering the topic of Merlin and Morgana?"

The ghost hovered for a moment, silent, while Harry's words seemed to sink in. "No Mister...Palmer...that topic...is not...in the current...curriculum."

Harry's hand stayed up. Unconsciously, more heat got channeled out of the floor-stones into the edge of the desk where Harry's other hand clutched it. "I understand, sir. What about the founding of Hogwarts? Or Beaubaxtons?"

"Er...no...Mister...Palmer."

Harry was not nearly through making his point. The faint smell of wood smoke wafted from between his fingers as Harry asked, "Well,

sir, what about the origins of the Statute of Wizarding Secrecy? Or the history of magic wands? Or the history of how elves came to be house-elves?"

All the students currently awake had been staring at Harry, and presently looked back to Binns. A faint but visible curl of smoke trailed away from the hand clutching the side of Harry's desk. Hermione gave a faint sniff and glanced around. Her eyes went wide as she spotted the char marks spreading beneath Harry's left hand.

The ghost took a five second pause to consider Harry's question, then replied "...Not really... Mister Palmer,...no."

Harry had three more nails for the coffin. With his right hand still raised, he asked a bit more heatedly, "What about the last two Dark lords, sir? What about Grindelwald? What about Voldemort? Does your curriculum make any mention of Harry Potter, professor?"

Harry lowered his right hand then, having made his point, and unconsciously relaxed the left a moment later. He kept eye contact with the ghost, inviting a reply, but he could see Lisa shaking her head and fighting a grin out of the corner of his eye. Hermione was also shaking her head, but her eyes were closed and she was pinching bridge of her nose with one hand. Padma, meanwhile, was looking toward him with a pleased smile on her face. Kelly had her hands over her eyes and appeared to be chuckling silently. The other three Raven boys wore various grins and smirks. Even Ron Weasley was staring at Binns, dumbfounded that their History of Magic class was not, in fact, covering much of the actual history of magic.

Hermione glanced again at the approximately hand-sized burn mark on the side of Harry's desk, with the four charcoal-and-ash ovals in the center where his fingers had rested. 'He did that while distracted, and annoyed,' Hermione realized. 'That's...mildly alarming. What kind of energy is he capable of moving around when he actually tries, I wonder?' The curl of smoke died off, but the faint smell of burned wood lingered.

Unbeknownst to her or Harry, Ron Weasley had smelled the smoke, too - he thought perhaps someone nearby was cooking, at first-until he spotted the charred wood as Harry's hand moved away. Ron just

stared a bit, jaw slack, head tilting. 'How in Merlin's name...' he wondered.

Meanwhile at the front, Binns seemed a bit steam-rolled. He floated in place and squinted back towards where Harry sat in the middle of the class. Finally, he said, "None of...the people...you mentioned...are...part of... the...curriculum, ...Mister Palmer. ...However, we ...could perhaps...discuss Merlin...at some point...if you like." Binns apparently considered that a sufficient answer. The ghost looked left and right once more, then said "Class...dismissed.". Binns picked up a ghostly satchel, turned and glided slowly straight through the front wall.

Kelly Bloom let her suppressed laughter out the second the old ghost faded from view. Hammond joined her, then Steven, Padma and Clarkson. Lisa gave in, and as Harry looked to his right, so did Hermione. All the Ravens and most of the Gryffs were laughing at the absurdity of what they'd just seen. Lisa, still chuckling, looked at Harry and said "Nice job, `Palmer`!"

"I just...", Harry said, with a shrug, "I just wanted to, you know, learn some actual history," Harry attempted to explain. "Those are the things I want to know about."

"You weren't wrong, Harry," Lisa said, still grinning.

"What about you, Neville?" Harry asked the boy on his right wiping tears of laughter from his eyes.

"I agree, Harry, I agree," Neville said in a mirthful voice, and then mumbled to himself, "...had he ever heard of Harry Potter, asks Harry Potter... that's just too much..."

"You're applying too much common sense, Harry," Steven said. "Let that go and things will get easier," he said with a knowing nod.

"Right. I'll remember that, Stevie. Thanks," Harry said with a shake of his head. He leaned to his right to collect his books from the floor, and Neville drew his attention with a question. Harry stood whilst responding to Neville, and never saw the little conversation going on behind him. Ron had leant forward to tap Hermione lightly on the shoulder, which startled her momentarily.



"Wha?...oh!...Hi, Ron. What's up?"

Ron said quietly, "You might want to repair that," he said, indicating the charred desk with a nod of his head.

"You think?" she asked.

"Definitely," Ron replied. "Why invite extra attention?"

"Right," Hermione answered, and pulled her wand discretely from her robes. Surreptitiously she leaned across and touched the edge of the desk, and whispered "reparo". The charred area began to shrink, as if burning in reverse. In a moment the desk looked as it always had. She traded a look with Ron.

"Well done," he said quietly, nodding at her. Hermione bit her lips between her teeth and sent a little nod back. Their eyes both glanced to Harry, who was still speaking with Neville. After a moment or two, Harry glanced back at Hermione.

"Ready?" Harry asked.

She nodded, then glanced back to Ron, and said "Thanks, Ron. See you later."

"Right, Flying lessons later! I can't wait," he answered with obvious enthusiasm.

"Good," Harry said, "We'll see you then, Ron." Harry glanced at her, and said "Hermione, team Turpin needs a chat."

Hermione nodded, and the three of them exited amidst their peers. Harry called after Lisa to wait for them, and the three of them walked together back to the Ravenclaw Tower. Harry steered them to the second floor, room six. It had not yet been cleaned, but they found a large mostly rectangular room with a curved rear wall featuring seven tall, narrow windows. Dust cloaked everything in an even layer, and sheets covered stacks of boxes and at least one suit of armor. Two large chandeliers hung from the high-arched stone ceiling, devoid of candles.

"You pick the nicest places," Lisa said dryly.

"Hey, beggars can't be choosers, and Professor Flitwick told me the room would be ready for tomorrow at eight."

"I like it," Hermione said. Lisa looked at her dubiously. "I mean, it needs a cleaning of course, but it's large and the windows make it bright in here. We have gobs of room to spread out and not be tripping over one another. We really get this space as our own for the rest of the year?"

"Yep," Harry said. "Here's what else I learned yesterday from the professor: We," Harry said, indicating Lisa and himself, "...are nominally in charge of the Study Club. Flitwick sends his compliments, by the way; I told him it was your idea," Harry said.

"What that means, practically speaking, is that we police any goofing off, and we monitor for safety." Lisa nodded in understanding. He continued, "I suggest you be the official club captain, and Hermione and I will be your minions. Every leader needs minions," Harry said with a touch of humor. "You two are more clever than me, frankly, so I defer to you on the club schedules, and how you want to divide up the space, and decorate. I will volunteer to lead a study group on transfiguration or Potions if you like, as those are my strongest subjects at the moment; Nosferatu notwithstanding," Harry added dryly, prompting a smile from Lisa.

"I have minions!" Lisa said happily, trying out the idea. "This is excellent! I'll do the Charms circle - I think study circles could work, with different topics in their own areas of the room; Kelly and I will lead any reviews for COMC. I'll rope Padma into leading the Arithmancy circle."

Both of them glanced to Hermione, the question being implicit.

"I suppose I'll lead the Runes one, and maybe split the Herbology one with Neville."

"Excellent. That leaves Astronomy-" Lisa began.

"-Steven, definitely Steven for that," Harry interjected.

"Alright, that leaves just divination," - Hermione snorted while Harry rolled his eyes, "...okay, perhaps not; and your favorite, 'Palmer', Magical History."

Harry made a growling sound, and then said "Lets leave that one 'till later, shall we?"

"Fair enough, we'll see if the curriculum changes first," Lisa said jovially.

"Ugh. Speaking of which", Harry said, and pulled from his pocket his wish-list of topics, which he handed to Hermione, "see if you can't add to that." The Girls both glanced at it, Lisa nodding with approval.

"Will do," Hermione said. "I'll rewrite this into something presentable."

Harry answered, "Right. Good." He drew a long breath, then said "Okay, new topic. You both know that Penny is lecturing tomorrow morning. I expect somewhere between a dozen and twenty people to attend. I'm personally really looking forward to hearing what she has to say."

"Me too," Hermione said, while Lisa said "ditto".

"And next week is Anthony, you said, with the pureblood perspective on muggle excursions, correct?" Hermione asked.

"Correct. I mentioned that to four or five magical-born types already - Ernie Macmillan, the Weasley brothers, Mike Corner, Neville - and they are all interested to hear what Anthony has to say."

The girls nodded. Lisa said, "Hermione, could you work with Penny to make sure she's got enough topics to fill, say, ninety minutes tomorrow? And I'll do the same for Anthony."

"Minion Palmer, you've got the food lined up for tomorrow, correct?" Lisa asked with humor in her voice.

"Yep," Harry said with a crooked grin, "Coffee, Tea, and pastries for a dozen people have been requested. Which, knowing the house elves, means enough for twenty."

Lisa nodded, and said "Sounds like everything is on track, then. Good job, team Turpin."

Harry blinked, and said "Actually, that's not a bad idea. Since you're the nominal head of the Study Club, what say we put all those activities under Team Turpin. Team Granger," Harry said, glancing at Hermione," has one activity right now, a quest. We're the redshirts for that one," Harry said, indicating Lisa and himself."

Hermione said "Yes! I have minions too. And was that a Star Trek reference, minion Palmer?"

"Oh, yeah," Harry answered with a nod and a full smile.

Extrapolating, Lisa asked "So what's Team Potter doing, then?"

Harry grinned fiercely. "Special projects," he said with relish, waiting for the inevitable arching of eyebrows. He was not disappointed.

"Such as?" Hermione asked.

"Our shopping trip, for one," Harry said. "I'll work out the transport, the agenda, our permission slips, and whatnot."

"And Pizza! Don't forget the pizza!" Lisa practically shouted.

"And the pizza, of course, and the coffee supplies. I'm still working out how we can find out in advance what shops and restaurants there are Dufftown, aside from what Penny remembers. I suppose I'll try and snag a BT directory." (AN: British Telecom phone book)

"Ah, that's good thinking, Harry. We'll know what are options are, then," Lisa said.

Harry nodded. "Also, I wanted you both to know I've invited the two Slytherins I mentioned to the Study Club sessions, and on the trip as well, provided they behave themselves and follow the same rules as everyone else. I will vouch for them, provisionally." Harry looked to Lisa, and said "If you see them causing trouble, or worse, being discriminated against, please let me know. I'm doing this for the reasons you heard me tell Hagrid about. I won't stand by and watch two smart, decent people get bullied by the school because of a stigma on their house. I want us to create an alternative to that."

"Hmm. Saving the Slytherins; you know how to pick your battles, don't you, Harry?" Lisa asked with a shake of the head.

"I know how to win them, too," Harry said with conviction. Lisa raised her hands in a peace-making gesture.

"Harry, who are we talking about, exactly?" Hermione asked.

Harry met each of their eyes in turn. "Daphne Greengrass and Tracey Davis," he answered. Lisa nodded, whereas Hermione thought about it for a moment longer. Harry watched her intently.

"I'm willing to give them a chance," Hermione finally said. "I really, really hate bullies," she said darkly enough to give the other two pause. "Oh, that reminds me-" she said, looking back at Harry, "...we need a DADA circle leader -that's GOT to be you, Harry!"

Harry's brain flashed back to their conversation on the train some days ago, when he assured Hermione that they would know a few decent defensive spells. Harry huffed out a long breath. He met Hermione's eyes, then Lisa's, and then said with absolute conviction, "Agreed. I've met a few would-be bullies already. Magic makes them more arrogant and eventually, more powerful. I, for one, will not see my friends picked-on. We already have our make-up DADA lessons with Anthony teaching us what Quirrell won't. I will gladly run a study circle, and I will tutor people as much as it takes. We will all be up to snuff in magical self defense, so help me God." His eyes were emerald ice by the time he finished speaking, and the sight of them caused Hermione to shiver a bit. Lisa had not heard that tone of voice from him before, and it was...memorable.

It was with that observation fresh in mind that Lisa chose her next words carefully. "I hear your sincerity, Harry - I do. But, are you sure you have the aptitude to run a DADA study group?"

Hermione snorted in a most unladylike way. Lisa looked at her. Harry glanced at Hermione, an unspoken question in his eyes. She thought about it for a blink, then nodded slightly him. Harry nodded back and exhaled audibly.

Lisa watched this nonverbal exchange, and said ""What are you two on about?"

"A demonstration," Harry said. Hermione's pulse jumped at that pronouncement. Harry lowered his book bag to the floor beside him and dropped his wand out of his sleeve into his hand. He pondered that he hadn't cast many spells yet that day, and he still had most of the reabsorbed magic from last night swirling around in his system. He let a bit of that magic flow into his voice, and let rather a lot flow into his wand. He brandished the now faintly glowing length of spruce away from the girls and towards the room at large. He visualized what he wanted in exact detail, which was getting easier with practice, and then he said in a Voice of Power, "Wingardium Leviosa Omnia". This was one of Flitwick's spell variations, learned just last night with the spheres.

Lisa Turpin hadn't actually seen a lot of big magic worked yet. This certainly qualified. Harry Potter was levitating everything - the entire contents of the room -simultaneously. That had to be thirty chairs, at least, and desks, and two blackboards, four bookcases, and a suit armor, Lisa thought. Everything in the room was floating except the three of them. Lisa realized the amount of power and control it would take to lift, what - it must have been over a thousand pounds of stuff, at least - and her eyebrows climbed high. Potter's hand was glowing! Literally glowing, with a faint blue and silver halo around the wand. That voice that just came from him, that was unlike anything she'd ever heard before; like four or five echoing voices casting at once. 'How?' her mind wanted to know.

After eight or ten seconds Harry lowered the room's contents back to to their places once more. His accumulated magical reserves were fairly well depleted with that little stunt, but their reaction had been worth it. Lisa made to speak, but he wasn't through. She saw him drop to one knee and place a hand, palm down, on the stone floor. Lisa heard him inhale deeply, and...suddenly, a wave of fierce cold bit at her ankle. She looked down to see a circle of bright white frost on the floor, including one of her shoes, extending out from his palm about a meter in every direction. Lisa and Hermione's eyes were very, very wide. Harry calmly stood up, looked at her, and created a cone of flame -'Flame!', her brain was screaming, over his open hand. He stood there looking intently at her. After a four of five seconds, he said quietly and with authority, "Sufficiently convinced?"

Lisa was nodding before she realized she was in fact doing so. Harry dismissed the cone of flame, which simply vanished. Her brain was fighting for traction, trying to reconcile what it just experienced. 'Fire..Ice..that amount of power...'

For her part, Hermione had some idea what had been coming, but she was still impressed to watch Harry work magical and energetic forces like that. 'Damn,' the naughty voice in her head thought, while another reprimanded it for 'language'.

"Stars and stones, Harry... how?" Lisa asked.

He glanced at Hermione, the back to Lisa. "...I can't tell you everything, yet. But what I can share or teach, I will; you have my word. Good enough for now?" Lisa pursed her lips and then nodded once more. Hermione wore a tiny smile, thinking her friend was pretty amazing.

Lisa sighed, cast a look around, and said "Are we done here for now, then?"

Harry's expression changed to a pleased one. He said "One more bit of information - I got the details on sending muggle post via the Hogsmeade post office," Harry said triumphantly. "Care to send a letter or two? Or shop by mail, perhaps?" He said, bumping his eyebrows.

"Oh! Harry, that's fantastic!," Hermione exclaimed, rocking up on her toes with happiness. Lisa still was still a bit in the dark; she sent letters home by owl regularly; how was this different?

Harry read her expression, and said "How does the 'Coffee of the Month' club sound to you, Lisa?" Her eyes went wide with recognition and her face lit up. Postal deliveries! Muggle postal deliveries! A huge smile materialized. "That's absolutely ace! Brilliant!" she said happily.

"Thought you'd like that," Harry said with a smile. "No need to pretend the rest of the world has ceased to exist just because we're stuck here until Christmas."

"Definitely not," Hermione said. "I'll have a few catalogs sent from home so we can do a bit of shopping by mail."

"Excellent," Harry replied. "Do you think your parents could look up something for me? I want the address for the chamber of commerce over in Dufftown."

"I'll send them an owl later today. We should hear back tomorrow or Sunday."

Hermione checked her watch, and said "We have about thirty-five minutes left until next class; let's walk back to the common room for a bit so I can write that letter."

The trio did so. Hermione sent off her owl, and they spent some time reviewing their homework for the next class, which was the once-a-week daytime half of the Astronomy class. The class itself went well, with Professor Sinistra reviewing their previous assignments in depth. She introduced the next topic - the zodiac -by illustrating some night sky scenes in the darkened classroom with a projector-like device that made it appear as though they were indeed gazing at the stars. Harry was keen on learning those spells for his own room. The three Slytherin boys were intentionally separated at the outset of class by Sinistra. Harry supposed she'd been forewarned, or was simply perceptive. Draco and Prominent Brow Ridge Girl - Millicent something or other, Harry thought, were beside one another at the front. Draco's minions were seated quite specifically on the other side of the room. It seemed to work, as the minions had no incentive to try and entertain Draco. Harry wondered why more professors didn't take that approach. Harry spent the first ten minutes of the lecture with his wand hidden behind his calf and discretely resting against the humming stone floor, replenishing his supply of borrowed magic.

As class ended, Harry got a brainwave, and whispered "linger a moment" to both Lisa and Hermione. He watched the remaining students start to file out, and he caught Tracey's eye when she glanced at him. He sent her a small twitch of the head to indicate she should come over. She drew her lips between her teeth in a very familiar gesture, and caught Daphne's robes from behind with a little tug. She whispered in Daphne's ear, and the two stopped before reaching the door, to apparently look at a large animated poster of the zodiac decorating the wall. The two girls stood there discussing the poster for some time while the remainder of the students filed out to lunch. Soon only the five of them remained in



the room, along with Professor Sinistra, who had disappeared into the adjoining office some minutes prior.

"No time like the present," Harry said quietly. The three Ravens carefully approached the Snakes. Harry was aware that first impressions were crucial. He carefully pushed the door almost all the way closed, and turned back to the two Slytherins.

Harry sketched a bow and said quietly, "Hello Daphne, Tracey. May I present two good friends of mine, Lisa Turpin and Hermione Granger. They're both cleverer than me, and they don't judge people before they've met them."

Daphne's eyebrow arched at that, and the corners of her mouth turned up slightly. She shared a long look with Tracey, who eventually nodded. Screwing up her courage, Daphne extended her hand to Hermione and said "Pleased to meet you. Daphne Greengrass." Harry fought down a grin.

After the introductions were complete, Lisa officially invited the two girls to participate in the Study Club, and explained about the special event Saturday morning. Tracey's reaction was immediately favorable; Daphne looked a little less convinced. Hermione described the following week's intended lecture from Anthony, and then it clicked for Daphne and Tracey; both agreed to attend.

Tracey said, "Would any of you mind if we invited Stephen Cornfoot along to the lecture? He's not a ponce like the other three," she said, nodding towards where Draco had recently sat.

Lisa traded a look with Harry, who nodded. She replied "That's fine. The lecture's open to anyone who can behave themselves. After that we'll see about perhaps admitting him to the Study Club." Tracey nodded in understanding.

Lisa nodded toward Harry and said quietly, "Harry's vouched for you two, so you're accepted, provisionally. You follow the same rules as everyone else: any funny business or unsafe behavior, and I will bounce you out; any discrimination against muggle-borns and I will bounce you out; any discrimination directed at you, bring it to me, or Potter. Clear?"

"Clear," Daphne said, while Tracey nodded.

"One last thing," Harry said. "We're glad to have you," he added with a smile. He reached out to shake Daphne's hand, then Tracey's. "See you tomorrow at eight." Both girls looked pleased to hear that.

"We should probably leave separately," Tracey said. "It would be easier for us, for now." Lisa nodded, and the two Slytherin girls glided towards the door.

Daphne paused, turned back to Harry and said, "I presume the white owl is yours?" Harry nodded. "She's beautiful," Daphne continued, "...but very conspicuous." Harry realized he'd neglected to consider that before. "So if you need to communicate by mail, send a plain Hogwarts owl, if you could."

"I understand."

Then Daphne did something unexpected, and it went by so quickly Harry wasn't completely sure he saw it: she winked at him, and then turned and glided out the door.

Hermione softly pushed the door shut behind the girls. "Hmm. That went well," she said quietly.

"Well enough," Lisa said. "I don't envy them their situations."

"That's why we're helping to change it," Harry responded.

After a final glance around, the Ravens departed for lunch as well. Harry might have seen the signs had he looked carefully, but as it happened he did not, so they were unaware that one Aurora Sinistra had paused just inside her office door at the sound of their voices. Without meaning to, she'd overheard their entire conversation. As a former Slytherin herself, she admired the ambition it took to challenge the status quo at an institution as old as Hogwarts, and in the interests of saving a few Slytherins, no less. Perhaps she would watch these five for a bit, and see into what orbits they settled.

Lunch was a fairly jovial affair, partly because Hammond, Clarkson and Wright were all rather excited about the flying lessons later today, that house Ravenclaw shared with Hufflepuff. Harry was rather keen on seeing how exactly magic overcame gravity. The lunch menu today included a delicious chicken soup served in

cauldrons, three or four to a table; mountains of fresh-baked rolls; platters of cold meats and cheeses; and large bowls of fruit. Harry pocketed an apple for later, and got a bit...inspired, by the quantity and quality of the food prepared for the students. It was more food, and of better quality than he ever got at Privet Drive. Harry had thought about what Tiggy had said, about how the elves heard him 'speaking across the stones'. Deciding a little thanks wouldn't go amiss, Harry gathered a bit of magic, focused his will, and briefly touched the stone floor. "Thank you all for the delicious food," he whispered sincerely, and let the magic flicker away towards the walls.

Most of the Hogwarts house-elves heard the message within seconds, and the few who did not were soon told of it. A little cheer broke out amongst the elves in the kitchens, and it promptly turned into a happy work song, such was their pleasure at having their efforts recognized. Tiggy had told them all by now of the identity of the young stone-speaker, of course, and that prompted some jostling and competition to be amongst the elves who cleaned the Ravenclaw dorms. The elves' race memory, their stories, went back to the time when the four great wizards spoke across the castle stones to them and one another, before it all went wrong. Now a new speaker had come, the first in a hundred years at least. His voice was younger and brighter than the ancient humming of the castle walls, and made the elves very happy indeed.

Harry spent the free hour after lunch composing two letters. The first went to the Goblin known as Griphook, in which Harry requested that a portkey be made for him for Saturday at 1PM, provided that was acceptable to Griphook. He added different but equally flamboyant Goblin greetings and closings to the letter, and included once again the impression of his bloodied knife-tip. Fortunately he could heal his thumb with a bit of magic, and did so afterwards. The second letter, to the Hogsmeade postmaster, required no such formalities, and simply requested the establishment of a postal service box appropriate for sending and receiving muggle as well as magical post. Once summoned, Hedwig seemed pleased to have more work to do for her wizard.

Divination wasn't as rubbish as Harry feared it would be; it was far, far worse - or far more vacuous, to be precise. There was no actual magic involved, Harry realized, only some supposed pre-cognitive 'gift' that clearly defied logic. He muddled through the exercises,

partnering with Ernie. Neither of them could see anything but leaves in their tea leaves, and the crystal balls didn't reveal anything to them either. Internally, Harry bemoaned the loss of another productive hour each week to this nonsense. Both Lisa and Hermione agreed with him in their post-class commiserations.

Things took a turn for the better when their group finally got outside and around to the south side of the castle for their first flying lesson. Harry's impression of Madam Rolanda Hooch was immediate and striking. Her magical radiance was blue-green, avian, sharp and predatory, but tempered with restraint. It reminded him a bit of Hedwig, and seemed wholly appropriate for a flying instructor. Or an eagle. Whichever.

They were instructed on the basics of hovering on their brooms, which Harry could see were enchanted five different ways at least, and surprisingly comfortable thanks to something Hammond later identified as a cushioning charm. The class ran smoothly, and Hooch allowed those students with previous broom experience to have short fly under the watchful gaze of a sixth-year, the Hufflepuff keeper.

Meanwhile, Hooch had the six first-time flyers practicing low and slow over the south lawn. They flew in a circle around her, learning to steer and stop the antique brooms. Harry, Lisa and Justin thoroughly enjoyed it. Padma seemed a bit tentative, and Hermione rather stiff and uncomfortable, as if she believed the broom were going to buck her off any minute.

Harry flew alongside her, and said "Hermione, relax a bit. It only goes where you tell it to. Steer with your knees a bit more." That seemed to help her somewhat, but she still looked rather unhappy on a broom. Harry wondered if she'd ever ridden a bicycle at home; he surely hadn't.

Madam Hooch reassembled the class and sent them off with a homework assignment, an essay describing in general terms the different kinds of magic laid into a broom to make it fly. Hammond looked nearly eager to have a go at that assignment. Harry took a detailed look at his broom just prior to returning it, and saw something interesting - minute runes etched into the iron coil that held the twigs to the handle. He stepped over to where Hooch was standing, and asked about them.

"Good eye, Mister Potter. Those are the stabilizing, braking and power runes. Those are permanent features of the broom, whereas others are applied with temporary charms suited to the owner or rider."

Harry nodded. "Power runes, Ma'am? What do they do, exactly?"

"That's part of your assignment, in fact. But I'll give you a hint: the broom does not draw magic from its rider, so therefore?" she asked with a look.

"...It must carry its own magical power. But why a rune cluster?"

"Permanence, Mister Potter, and strength. It wouldn't do to have the broom fall out of the sky just because the rider was magically exhausted, or injured. Have a go at the books; you'll find out the rest quickly enough, I wager. Ask Mister Hammond, there. His father's a well-known broomsmith."

Harry offered her a smile. "I shall. Thank you, Madam."

The class trooped back up to the castle in a ragged bunch, with the majority of their number yammering enthusiastically about their first flights of the year. Harry checked on Hermione's state of mind. She was much happier on terra firma. It was a little after four o' clock, and they needed to start making their way to the Deputy Headmistress' office.

Harry knocked upon the door to Minerva McGonagall's office at precisely 4:15. She bid them enter from her place at her desk, and was surprised to find Harry with a companion.

"Miss Granger, may I ask why are you here as well?" Minerva asked in her crisp Scots burr.

"Harry requested it, Ma'am."

"Oh, really? Do tell, Mister Potter," Minerva said with a glance to him.

"Yes, Ma'am. We had a rather disturbing revelation about our History of Magic class today. We were hoping you could hear us out."

"Very well, we shall discuss that in a moment. First, though, I should like to understand how you were able to produce these, Mister Potter." McGonagall set a familiar knife and fork down on the desk before her. Harry recognized the design as his own.

"I made them, Ma'am, in your class on Wednesday. We created them from twigs."

"Correct, Mister Potter. However these items are not transfigured, are they?"

Part of Harry's brain went thunk. His mouth said "No, Ma'am."

Harry felt Hermione's look of surprise without having to actually see it, such was the ripple in her magical radiance as it glowed in the corner of his eye.

McGonagall stared intently at Harry. Reflexively, he blanched. The woman had a rather formidable stare. He kept the eye contact and said, "In confidence, Ma'am?"

McGonagall studied him for a moment. Her feline aura swayed and slipped around her stone-still form. After a breath, McGonagall nodded and said "Very well."

"I did make them, Professor. Just not in the standard way."

"Yes, I know. I consulted with Filius about the nature of these items. We are both convinced they are permanently transformed." Another, brighter flash came from his right.

"Yes, Ma'am. I mean, that's what I was trying for."

Minerva's eyebrows rose to their highest point so far that year. "Pardon, Harry - did I hear you correctly that you were trying to permanently transform these items, and succeeded?"

"Yes, Ma'am. I did the standard transfiguration a half-dozen times, and began to wonder if there wasn't a way to change the items permanently, instead of just temporarily. I experimented a bit, and it worked."

"Evidently," McGonagall said dryly. "Are you aware that such a permanent transformation was generally thought to be impossible?"

"Yes, Professor. I believe 'impossible' is more of an opinion than a fact, Ma'am."

Minerva's brows rose once more. Hermione beat her to the next question, and asked "Who said that?"

"It was the American Cassius Clay, one of the world's great athletes. He believed impossible was temporary. I wanted to change those items, Ma'am, and I figured out how. I made it happen, so clearly it was possible. "

Hermione was staring at Harry again, and trying very hard to stop her jaw from hanging open.

Minerva's eyebrows reversed their descent, and she asked, "...but how?"

"Er...I asked my magic to stop pretending to be a knife, and actually make a knife instead."

Minerva and Hermione both tilted their heads in a not dissimilar way as they looked at Harry. The small part of his brain not busy being apprehensive was rather amused. McGonagall looked at Hermione, and said "Miss Granger, does that make any sense to you?"

Hermione redirected her gaze to Minerva, and said "Er, sort of, Ma'am. Harry said something like that to me on the first day of class, about the magic pretending to be whatever you ask it to be. He thinks about magical theory differently than most...well, than anybody else I know."

"Apparently," Minerva said. She glanced down at the cutlery on her desk once more. "Whatever you're doing, Mister Potter, it seems to work for you. But do try to stick to normal transfigurations in class, if you would."

"Yes, Ma'am." Harry said, thinking he may have just passed some sort of test.

"I should like to hear more of your theories, at some point, Mister Potter. And about these, as well," she said, indicating the cutlery on her desk.

"I'd be pleased to, Professor."

Minerva looked at him for a long moment once again, and then said "Very well. What is the other issue? Miss Granger?"

"We sat our first history of Magic class today, Ma'am."

Yes, I heard something about that," Minerva said. "Do go on."

"Well, we got to the end of class, and Professor Binns called for questions. Harry, " Hermione glanced at Harry, who nodded back slightly," ..Harry asked if the curriculum included the rather obvious topics of Merlin and Morgana. Professor Binns said no, so Harry asked whether the Statute of Wizarding Secrecy would be discussed, or the origins of magic wands, or the history of house elves. Professor Binns isn't covering any of those topics, Ma'am." Minerva's eyebrows lifted; she hadn't known that.

"In fact," Hermione said with more heat, as her passion from this morning rekindled, "...he's not planning on covering anything about Hogwarts, or Beaubaxtons, or the last two wizarding conflicts - Nothing on Grindewald, nor Voldemort," -Minerva's brows rose as high as they'd ever been - "nor even the Harry Potter story itself." Hermione pointed at Harry, and concluded with fervor, "He didn't even recognize the most famous wizard alive, sitting in his own classroom! What he's teaching is not history, Ma'am, it's a travesty! Even the so-called purebloods in the room agreed those things should be in the curriculum." Hermione was huffing and a bit pink when Harry stole a glance at her. That girl took her education seriously, Harry noted.

"...I see," Minerva said after the echo of Hermione's voice faded. "You may have a point, Miss Granger. Some of those topics are quite obviously important; however, some are so recent that they may not be in the history texts yet," Minerva temporized.

Harry said, "Respectfully, Ma'am, do you mean to tell me there are no books about the night Voldemort perished? Because I'm certain



there are at least twenty, all them most assuredly inaccurate. Take my word for it."

Minerva's head tilted back at that. If the Boy Who Lived Through It said so, who was she to argue with him? She glanced between the two of them, and frowned.

"Well. Leaving aside that question for the moment, I must admit I have not reviewed the Magical History curriculum in some years. Do you have a sense of what you believe should be included?"

"We have some suggestions," Harry said as Hermione handed his amended list to Minerva. The woman glanced at it, and saw listed there at least twenty topics and themes, ranked in order of importance. She quickly glanced through the first five and had to agree they seemed perfectly appropriate to a History of Magic class.

"Perhaps you could review the curriculum with Professor Binns, Ma'am, and see which of these may already be covered, and consider addressing at least some of the rest in class," Harry said. Minerva found it rather extraordinary to be having a curriculum planning discussion with two first years...'But they are Ravenclaws,' she reminded herself.

"Very well, I shall review your list and perhaps speak with Professor Binns about the curriculum. He does like to focus on the sixteen hundreds..." Minerva said.

Before their imminent dismissal was delivered, Harry said "Ma'am, we have another directly related request." Minerva's glance snapped to Harry once more. He was indeed as ...challenging as some of the other Ravenclaws she'd known.

She folded her hands on her desk and gave him her full attention. "What is it, Mister Potter?"

"There is a magical knowledge gap at Hogwarts for the students raised in non-magical households, Ma'am. We grow up not hearing anything about the magical world for eleven years, then one day a letter arrives, and we get introduced to a whole new world overnight. Consider having to live purely as a muggle starting tomorrow, Ma'am, and I think you'll see what we mean."

Minerva thought about that for a beat, and her jaw actually dropped a bit as the idea sunk in. She was glad she was sitting down, lest she fall down. "Oh, my...Well," she said after a moment of shocked silence. "That's...a rather astonishing observation, Harry."

He nodded to her. "Yes, Ma'am. It occurred to us," he nodded at Hermione, "that having a book or two would help, sort of a primer on the magical world. But there are none at present, at least not here in the library." Minerva's eyebrows arched once more. The boy certainly was full of ideas.

"We thought it might be useful to have some of the older muggle-born students who have experienced it, talk to the younger ones about integrating into Magical society." Minerva considered that for a blink, and found it practicable.

"Very logical, Mister Potter. Five points to Ravenclaw for an excellent idea," Minerva said. "Did you have a timeframe in mind?"

"Yes, Ma'am. Penny Clearwater is giving the first talk tomorrow," Harry replied, pleased at Minerva's mildly surprised expression.

"You certainly don't waste any time, do you, Harry?" Minerva asked dryly.

"I try not to, Ma'am. Time is valuable, and you only spend it once."

"Quite true."

Harry nodded. "With your permission, we'd like to organize something bigger and a bit more formal, a sort of voluntary lecture series for students covering different aspects of the magical world, for those who wish to know more about them."

Minerva's head tilted back once more at that; what an extraordinary conversation this was turning out to be. "Please elaborate," Minerva said. She picked up a quill, added a cover sheet to Hermione's parchment, and began making notes thereon.

"Several of us came up with a list of eight or ten aspects of the magical world that, as muggle-raised students, we'd like to know more about. I'd wager that many of the half-bloods and even some of the purebloods would find the information valuable as well."

Minerva looked up from her note to ask, "Such as?"

Hermione laid a second sheet of parchment on Minerva's desk. She glanced quickly at it and saw that enumerated items such as 'structure of the magical government', 'magical law enforcement', 'magical food production & manufacturing', 'diplomacy with muggle Britain', 'Magical medical practices', 'Magical sport', and so on.

"This is well thought out," she commented as she read.

"We did our best, Ma'am," Hermione said, "...but we may have missed some things we simply don't know about. That's sort of the point, really."

"Indeed," Minerva said, her eyes darting to Hermione briefly. "And you envision these topics being covered in voluntary lectures to students?"

"Yes, Ma'am," Hermione answered. "On selected evenings or Saturdays, perhaps. Sort of a Magical Studies primer, if you will. It occurred to us that perhaps a healer from St. Mungo's or a Ministry Auror might be willing to speak to us about their work, if they were invited to do so here at Hogwarts."

Minerva's head tilted to the side inquisitively. A sizable magical cat's tail swished behind her, forcing Harry to focus very hard on not laughing out loud.

Harry mastered his voice and said, "There is a Muggle Studies course offered in our third year, Ma'am. This is sort of the converse, a Magical Studies curriculum." Harry saw the light of comprehension go on in McGonagall's eyes. "We see it organized as a series of voluntary lectures, for now. I'd suggest that one day it might make a proper class"- Minerva's eyebrows climbed once more, "-but for now we'd like to get your commitment to give the lecture idea some thought. If you see merit in it, and the Headmaster approves, we'd be happy to assist with the organizational chores to help make it happen."

"You two certainly take an active role in your education," Minerva observed dryly, adding more notes to her parchment. She sighed quietly, and said "Very well, I'll look this over later, and present it to

Albus when I see him next. You've both given me a great deal to think about. "

Harry and Hermione shared a look. "Care for one more thing, Ma'am?" Harry asked with a hint humor.

Minerva raised raised a single eyebrow at the the most intriguing boy she'd met in some decades. "Do tell, Mister Potter," she said in her driest tone yet. Hermione smiled, guessing correctly at what Harry was about to say.

"I'd like to suggest at least one of those lectures, to the school at large, be about major muggle accomplishments since 1900. Ma'am."

Minerva's head tilted at him once more, in a rather catlike fashion, Harry noticed. Her expression was a trifle confused, and very dubious.

"Were you aware that muggles have been to the surface of the moon?" Harry asked. "Six times?" he added for emphasis.

Minerva shook her head mutely, eyes wide, quill poised in midair.

"There are at least a dozen other amazing technological developments the rest of the world has made," Hermione supplied. "Wizard society seems largely ignorant of those advances. We'd like to see that ignorance corrected," she added.

McGonagall nodded, and added a note to the parchment. "Six times, you said?" she asked, glancing to Harry.

"Yes, ma'am. And they have actual high quality photographs of all the planets in our solar system, taken from spacecraft that have flown out there, as well. Muggle technology presently exceeds magical capability in many cases. "

McGonagall squinted a bit at them, lips pursed in thought. After a moment, she added another line to the parchment in front of her, which Harry took as a good sign. Minerva looked back to them once more.

"Alright you two, I think that's quite enough to be getting on with. Unless you have any more challenging questions?"

"No, Ma'am," Harry said with a small smile. Hermione shook her head as well.

"I don't know how Filius manages, honestly...a whole house of students like you two would leave me exhausted, I'm sure," Minerva said kindly, and without any real sting.

"I do my best to challenge him, too, " Harry said with a ghost of a smile.

"Somehow I don't doubt that, Mister Potter." McGonagall's dry tone was back. "Miss Granger, do try to keep him in line, will you?"

Hermione grinned softly, and said "I'll do my best, professor, but Harry's sort of a ...special case," she added with humor.

"Very well. Harry, I will select a time for us to further discuss your...theories... for transfiguration. You may go for now. I shall let you know when some decisions are reached."

Both students thanked her, and turned to go, when Hermione got a brainwave. She half-turned back and said "Professor?", which caused Minerva to look up once more. "I was wondering if you happened to know whether there were any surviving artifacts of the Hogwarts Founders still here at the castle, Ma'am."

Minerva's eyebrow arched once again. "What an odd question...Hmm. I suppose the sorting hat qualifies, and Gryffindor's sword, of course, which is in a case in the Headmaster's office. I believe Helga Hufflepuff once had a chalice or goblet, but it's been lost to time. You might ask professor Sprout about that one. Now, if that's all?"

"Yes, Ma'am. Thank you again!" Hermione said with enthusiasm. She crossed to where Harry was holding the door for her and they stepped into the hall, leaving the older witch to her thoughts once again.

"Stars and stones," Minerva muttered after the door closed. "An hour with those two would send me to the Glenmorangie for certain. Visiting the moon..."

It was just after four thirty, so the two Ravens decided to spend their time in the Hogwarts library until dinner. Harry mentioned he had to leave a bit early to work on a 'project' with the Weasley twins, which drew a highly dubious glance from Hermione.

"We're exchanging knowledge, that's ALL, I swear it!" Harry said with a quiet laugh.

"Mmmm. Just don't consume anything they offer you, and don't turn your back on either of them. Have you forgotten they owe you a pranking? Do you want big green spots for a week?" Hermione said, her tone full of consternation.

"Oh...right."

"Mmmmm. Just...be careful, alright?"

"I shall. Thanks, Hermione. It means a lot that you're concerned for me. Really."

"Friends look out for one another, right?" she asked.

"Yeah," Harry said quietly. Hermione had the impression he was thinking about something, from the tone of his voice. "Yeah, they do, Hermione. Thanks."

They arrived a few minutes later at the Library, where Madam Pince gave Harry another withering glare as they walked past and towards the little corner they'd claimed as their own. They found Lisa and Kelly there, and surprisingly Tracey and Stephen Cornfoot as well. All three girls were doing the lengthy Potions essay for Monday, while Stephen was working on a runes assignment. The girls were stuck on the proper method for optimally preparing Goldenseal root, which does not respond well to boiling or dicing.

"Finally," Lisa whispered with exasperated humor upon seeing Harry and Hermione arrive and claim spots at the table. "The potions prodigy has deigned to join us."

Harry took a moment to introduce himself properly to Stephen Cornfoot, a tall, thin brown-haired boy with intense blue eyes and a surprisingly deep voice. A dark blue magical field surrounded him

with a crystalline, faceted appearance that Harry found rather memorable. The boy shook his hand without reservation, and Harry felt that dark blue magic buzzing against his palm as they did. Stephen's gift was not a modest one. Stephen was working on a runes translation, and he had nearly built himself a fortress of books in his pursuit of arcana. Harry left him to it, and turned back to Lisa and her two companions.

"Prodigy? Hardly," Harry said. "I just study four times harder than anyone else, out of self defense. The man lives to test me," Harry said.

"He is rather disproportionately rigorous with you," Tracey offered by way of agreement. Harry gestured to her in a 'there you go' sort of motion.

"Yeah, yeah, " Lisa said dismissively. Smirking, she patted Harry on the hand and said "Poor Harry suffers Snape's wrath so we don't have to."

"Your overwhelming kindness is duly noted," Harry retorted with a smirk of his own. Hermione snorted quietly beside him.

Tracey leaned forward a bit and said, "So we're trying to find the proper method of preparing Goldenseal, and it's doesn't seem to be in any of the three books for the class."

"It's not," Harry said, earning him three consternation-filled glances. "You need to grind it, dry it, and make a tincture in alcohol."

"And you know this, how?" Kelly asked from beside Lisa.

"Book number four," Harry said with a small grin. He enjoyed the looks of dismay from the three across the table. He pulled the old Potions text from his bag, the one used by the instructor prior to Snape, and handed it over. "Chapter 7, near the end. I'll want that back, please; it belongs to the Tower library."

Kelly found the page and propped the book up facing the three girls so that they all might read it together.

"I'll be a monkey's uncle," Lisa said after a moment. "He's assigning questions whose the answers aren't even in the approved books."

"Welcome to MY world," Harry said. "I've been through six potions texts already." This time he got marginally sympathetic glances from Lisa and Kelly.

"Maybe my Dad could send me a few of his old textbooks," Kelly said. "He read Potions years ago, but the basics haven't really changed, have they?"

"No, they haven't. Good idea!" Harry said, making eye contact with Kelly. She smiled back. Harry noticed her automatic blush response around him appeared to be gone.

Harry was distracted by Hermione sliding a muggle notebook page in front him face down. He slid it into his lap and flipped it over to see four handwritten lines in Hermione's neat script which read,

Gryffindor ~ sword ~ Dumbledore's office

Hufflepuff ~ goblet? ~ location unknown

Ravenclaw ~ diadem? ~ lost, location unknown

Slytherin ~ item unknown ~ location unknown

Sorting hat?

Harry glanced at her, and said "More research?"

Hermione's lip pulled sideways. She nodded and said, "Looks that way."

Harry turned to Tracey and asked, "Tracey - we're working on a little puzzle. Do you know if Salazar Slytherin left behind a magical artifact, like Gryffindor's sword?"

Tracey squinted a bit in thought, then said "You say the oddest things sometimes, Potter," which drew quiet chuckles from the three other Ravenclaw girls at the table. "I haven't heard of anything like that. Salazar wasn't big on weaponry, as far as I know."



"I see. Thanks, anyway. I'll go have a look around, then, and see what I can find," Harry said, rubbing his hands together with enthusiasm. Harry excused himself, as did Hermione.

A little after five o'clock, Harry wandered back to the table with a book in hand that had a one-page biography of Salazar, the most complete one he'd been able to find. It listed a fair number of his accomplishments, descendants, and supposed inventions, but made no mention of any significant objects or magical foci the man might have used. Harry slid the book in front of Hermione anyway, so that she could read it and see if perhaps he'd missed something. As she did, Harry chanced to look down the table to where Stephen was sitting.

Harry saw something that nearly made him jump out of his chair; Stephen had drawn out a large circle of runes on sheet of parchment in front of him in silver ink, and was tapping each of them in a certain sequence. Harry stared for a blink while his brain processed what he was seeing. He was out of his seat two seconds later, and strolling with forced casualness around the far end of the table to have a better look.

"Sorry to disturb you, Stephen. I saw the runic circle, and was curious. What does it do?"

Stephen's mouth turned up very briefly at the corners. "It's my extra-credit project. You're really curious?"

Harry nodded enthusiastically. "Very, yeah. I won't take your idea, though; Raven's honor."

Stephen shot him a brief half-grin. The tall boy said, "It's a sort of runic icebox, to keep food frozen for long periods of time when no one's around to refresh a charm. We have a vacation house in..uh..Italy," Harry caught the hesitation there - probably intentionally declarifying, he assumed, "...and it would be excellent to keep fresh food and drink in the ice-box there year-round."

"Makes sense," Harry said with a nod. "Very practical. I'm a novice at Runes, myself. How does it work?"

Stephen gave him that fast half-grin again, and said "It's pretty simple. This cluster," he said, pointing to a group of four runes at the

twelve o'clock position, is the control mechanism for the others. Around the edges there are seven sets of three runes, see?"

Harry dropped into the adjacent chair and looked closer. He did in fact see the runes around the perimeter of the circle repeated in groups of three. He nodded to Stephen, pointed at the rune in the middle of each trio, and said "What does Sowulo do here?"

"Ah, that's the power rune, obviously, to power the cooling rune, Isa," he said, pointing to the third in the set. "This one, Hagalaz, is the control rune linking the other two to the master control rune set at the top. You get temperature adjustability and regulation. Simple!" Stephen said with a flourish.

"For you, maybe," Harry said with humor. "How'd you get so sharp on these already?"

"My dad's a freelance runesmith. He uses them at home all the time; he prefers them to charms because he travels a lot. He's taught me and my brother enough so we wouldn't blow ourselves up accidentally."

Harry goggled at that for a second, and then said "That's a concern?"

"Oh, yeah," Stephen said, nodding emphatically. "Messing about with charged runes can be quite dangerous. My dad lost a hand to a rune circle by accidentally setting a reversed Raidho on top of a charged up Sowulo. Broke the control link, and the blast destroyed half the room."

"Really..." Harry said quietly. Stephen nodded.

"I guess that's why most people just stick with charms, then," Harry said. "Fewer explosions and everything."

Stephen showed that quick half-grin again. "True."

Harry glanced at the parchment once more, and said "So, does this one work, then?"

"It would, a bit, if I charged it up. This ink's not the best; more silver would be better."

"Could you?" Harry asked with unabashed enthusiasm.

"Sure," Stephen said, feeling pleased that someone, no, scratch that - Harry Potter was taking an interest in his work. Runes were rather frowned-upon by the general wizarding populace due to their intricacy of construction and their destructive power when improperly handled. Stephen tapped each of the control runes in turn, and Harry observed a little pulse of magic drop off the wand and linger behind on the rune as Stephen's wand moved onto the next. Stephen charged the cold runes next, and finally the power runes. He shoved what looked like a sizable amount of power into each of those, as far as Harry could tell. Lastly he tapped the master control rune, and the circle hummed to life, the ink shimmering with magic in Harry's perception.

Stephen slid the glowing parchment over towards Harry, and said "Try it out. Feel the air over the circle."

Harry did, and it was noticeably cooler than the surrounding air, just a bit above freezing, Harry guessed. "Wow!" he said quietly. "That really works!"

"For air, sure, Stephen said. "For cooling food, I'd have to carve this in wood, or better yet, etch it in metal."

"Why's that?" Harry asked with a confused look.

Stephen shrugged. "More magical storage potential. The parchment and ink have a pretty low magical capacity."

"Ah," Harry replied. That made sense, sort of.

"Hey, I've got to run to a little meeting, but I'd like to hear more, if you're willing. I could maybe trade you a cool spell or two, if you'd like."

Stephen thought about it for a second. He already preferred Harry's company to the other four in his dormitory, and the girls were here as well. "Alright," he said with a nod.

"You're coming by the thing tomorrow morning, yeah? Eight o'clock?"

"Tracey mentioned it, yes. I wasn't sure..." Stephen trailed off.

"Come by, meet some people. We'll have lots of food. You can always jump ship if you don't like the crowd."

"Thanks...I'll think about it."

"Good enough. Look, thanks awfully for the lesson. I've got to run. Pleasure meeting you," Harry said, and offered Stephen his hand.

"Same here," Stephen said, and offered Harry a real grin for the first time.

Harry made some quick goodbyes to the rest of the group, and jogged down to the Charms classroom to meet the wickedly wonderful Weasley twins.

Harry slid through the door at 5:36. Fred was perusing a bookshelf; George was magically juggling a dozen or so of the little rubber balls that Flitwick used in his class.

"Oy! Here he is, at last! Hullo, Harry," Fred said.

"Hello, Fred," Harry responded. "Sorry I'm late." He waved at George across the room.

"I'm George," Fred said merrily.

"Are not," Harry countered with a grin. "You're definitely Fred - you're the better looking one," Harry said.

"Ha! He knows us so well, dear brother."

George had just stepped over to join them, carrying a little leather book under his arm. "Alright, Harry?" he greeted. The three of them shook hands properly, and got down to business. Harry told them of his progress with the Occlumency exercises, and of the charm on his glasses. They were suitably impressed with his ability to 'charm' that perk out of Professor Flitwick.

Harry then explained the simple version of his pulse-of-magic spell, the one meant for crossing open air, and demonstrated it several

times. He found he could send a one-word message to either twin, or both, by using a short pulse and focusing on the recipient. He found it took very little power here in the school, which was a bonus. Oddly, the twins had almost no problem following his direction on how to do the spell, and they had both learned it well enough in fifteen minutes to be able to magically 'whisper' to each other, as George had dubbed it. Harry had never had it sent at him before, and it did indeed sound like a whisper when George sent a pulse at him. Harry could see the wave, of course, but they couldn't.

"Right useful, that," Fred said. "Have to give it a go on our old owl Errol next time we're back home."

"Or torment Percy," George suggested.

"If you work at it a bit, you can do it wandlessly as well," Harry said. 'See?' he sent them, casting the spell from a raised, empty hand. "Requires a bit more power, though."

George nodded, and said, "We'll find a use for that. Now what was it you wanted to know in trade, o junior mischief maker?"

"Me?" Harry said with a fake innocent tone. "Surely you're mistaken. We Ravensclaws are serious, bookish types."

"Right, right, 'course you are," George said with a huge grin.

"Now, hypothetically, how would I do a banishing spell, to toss something across the room?" Harry asked with a wag of his eyebrows. He hadn't had this much fun all day.

"Dear Harrykins, whatever are you planning to toss at your schoolmates?" Fred asked with humor.

"These," Harry said, and conjured three little red spheres of colored water, floating around the tip of his wand.

Two pairs of ginger eyebrows rose. "What are those, exactly?" Fred asked. Harry could practically hear the twins salivating.

"Oh, just a miniature bubblehead charm, full of colored water," Harry replied. Fred and George looked at each other, then back at Harry, and grinned hugely.

They spent the next ten minutes teaching Harry the banishing charm using Flitwick's little rubber balls - far less messy, Harry figured - until he had it mostly under control. He in turn showed them the spell chain to create the little colored water balloons, as Harry now thought of them.

Inevitably a free-for-all game of 'splatter each other' quickly ensued in the innocent Charms classroom. Splotches of color covered the walls and bookcases, the ceiling, the floor, and desks; but mostly it covered three now very sweaty, laughing and exhausted wizards. Harry fingered a smear on his robes; it smelled sweet. 'Is that..jam?' he wondered. He tasted a fleck of it, and realized it was indeed strawberry jam.

He held out his index finger, still with a bit of goop on it, and said "Which one of you switched to preserves?"

"Oh, that was me," Fred said. "Water got boring."

"Ah. I suppose I should be grateful it wasn't sour milk, or worse."

"Right," said Fred. (A\N: Couldn't resist)

George surveyed the brightly colored havoc all around them. He got to his feet, then levered Fred and Harry up as well. He said "Alright lads, time to clean up this mess. We don't want old Flitwick angry with us, do we? That man is a ruddy genius with a spell."

"And a dueling champion, four times over," Harry supplied helpfully.

"Quite right. So evanescos all around, yeah? And Harry, focus on the goop, not the books when you cast. We don't want to lose any school property, now do we?"

Less than ten minutes later the room was restored and their persons were clean again, mostly. The twins recommended strongly against trying to vanish goop from one's hair, because the hair usually went along with it. Apparently they learned that lesson the memorable way. Harry grinned at the mental image of a bald Fred and George.

"Thanks, guys; I haven't had that much fun in months", Harry said. "Oh, one more thing. I'm working on a little side project," - Fred

rolled his eyes, George grinned, "-and I want to power up a few rune clusters. Just some heat and cold-makers, nothing too extreme. And I want to be able to turn them on or off in a blink. Can you help me?"

George rubbed his chin. "Runes can be tricky business, there, Harry. They pack a lot of power in a small space. The shape IS the magic, and if you break the shape...boom."

"I understand. I solemnly swear-" Harry noticed both twins' eyes go wide, "... that I won't do anything dangerous with the information. No one will get near the runes except me."

The twins exchanged a long glance, and a long nonverbal exchange of squints and expressions flew back and forth between them. Finally, George looked to Harry and said, "We like you, Harry, so we'll help you out a bit here. We've got a book of our brother's at home that goes into pretty deep detail about runes. We'll lend it to you for a bit; it should be right up your alley. Oh, it's in German; you'll need a translation spell to read it. That you can find in the library, I expect."

"Thanks, guys!" Harry said. "Your brother? I assume this is an older brother?"

"Yeah, Bill's the oldest. He's a professional curse-breaker now, works for Gringotts. He's in Egypt at the moment, cracking tombs and the like. He's a journeyman runesmaster himself. That's one of his old books we have."

"Ah; excellent. I'll look forward to reading it," Harry said.

"Very-" Fred admonished.

"Very-" George continued.

"Carefully!" both twins finished.

"Got it. Careful. That's me, Mister Careful." Harry said with a nod. The twins grinned in stereo.

The three departed for dinner, and about halfway there passed none other than their illustrious Headmaster in the hall. He came gliding towards them as they turned a corner, exuding a cheerful,

grandfatherly kindness and a sense of wisdom in his ornately embroidered off-white robes and crimson over-robe. It was everything Harry could do not to flinch, or hide behind whichever of the twins was closer. Dumbledore was smiling benevolently, and his eyes twinkled distractingly when one looked at him. He looked for all the world like a cross between Gandalf and Santa Claus, and he practically scared the bodily fluids out of Harry Potter.

Dumbledore's magical radiance, which Harry had previously only observed from afar, was now front and center, and closing rapidly. The same scarlet and silver, shark-like creatures swam around him like living ribbons of magic. They circled and swirled around him, a bit more tightly around him, Harry noticed, and physically smaller as well. The part of Harry's brain not busy freaking out hypothesized that it was the confined space of the hallway that caused Dumbledore to restrain his magical field, consciously or otherwise. The old wizard smiled at them, and Harry again fought the urge to hide. He'd done nothing wrong; he was merely walking down a hallway, for Merlin's sake. Still, he thought he'd rather dodge a man swinging two growling chainsaws than walk through that magic.

The gap between themselves and Dumbledore closed, and as it did, Harry observed the shark-things shrink further in size and radius around the Headmaster. They looked like mere barracudas now, rather than sharks. They got much brighter to Harry's senses as they got smaller; more concentrated magic, perhaps. Some part of his brain that was done panicking formulated a rough plan, which was: in case of emergency he would shove all the magic within a meter of him down into the floor, and run. His higher-level judgment and discretionary reasoning skills were tossing their cookies at the moment, and they'd left the hind-brain in charge.

Dumbledore slowed his pace, took note their multicolored hair, and addressed them. "Good evening, Mssrs Weasley, Mister Potter. I hope your first week has gone well?"

"Brilliant, sir," the twins answered in twin-speak.

"Very good, thank you sir," Harry responded. Part of him marveled at how calm his voice sounded even as his heart raced. One of the hovering crimson barracudas was just inches from George's ear, and swimming towards Harry. His eyes widened involuntarily. It undulated forward and swung its head toward him, and Harry's



reptile brain panicked. He crushed the front half of the magical presence into the floor. The back end swam right on past him, oblivious, and looped back towards Dumbledore. Harry's heart was hammering so loudly he was certain the twins could hear it. He shifted his weight to start a sprint, but managed to control his leg in time.

"Excellent, excellent," Albus said lightly. "Interesting company you're keeping there. I trust you won't let your behavior be unduly influenced?"

Harry's brow knitted as his distracted brain tried to assemble a response to that. George had one at the ready:

"We know, sir-"

"-But he keeps following us around," Fred added

"-tempting us to mischief!" George finished with a nod.

Dumbledore twinkled more. He did so love their sense humor. "Quite, quite. Do look after one another, hmm? There is, after all, a time and a place for everything. Do enjoy your dinner, boys. Good evening." And with that, Albus Dumbledore resumed the walk to his office.

Four steps past the unusual trio, Dumbledore began to ponder what he'd just seen. Young Harry looked somewhat surprised, perhaps even skittish. Were they planning another prank, perhaps, and was his conscience not entirely clean? Albus thought that to be a likely possibility given the multicolored mess in their hair. It was odd, though, what he'd sensed from the boy magically. Normally, magical beings buzzed slightly to him when his magic encountered theirs; it had with the twins just now. In fact, he could recognize those two with his eyes closed after all their visits to his office. Even inert matter provided a faint magical back-pressure that Albus had over the decades learned to feel. But Harry...Harry was a void in his perception. Nothing bounced back from the boy at all. That was very odd, in Albus' experience; nothing else in the castle behaved that way, certainly. Only a handful of wards he'd ever encountered felt like that; very odd, indeed. Perhaps he would inquire after the boy at the next faculty meeting. A snippet of Phoenix song wafted down the magical stairway as he neared his office, derailing his swirling thoughts, and the moment was gone.

Harry arrived at dinner and rejoined his cohort at the Ravenclaw table, where he was promptly questioned about his multicolored hair. When he mentioned the Weasley twins were involved, everyone chuckled, assuming the worst. Dinner was a delicious spread of both roast beef and roast chicken, with two kinds of potatoes and five kinds of vegetables. Harry had never eaten so well for so many days in a row; he was sure he'd put on half a stone at least.

During afters Harry snagged a treacle tart and slid down the table to chat with Penny. He was gratified to see three pages of notes in her loopy handwriting intended for tomorrow, which Hermione had apparently read through earlier. He thanked her in advance once again, and offered pay for her and Anthony's lunch on the upcoming trip as a proper thank-you for their efforts, to which the pair readily agreed.

Once dinner began to wind down and the crowd thinned out a bit, Harry thought it prudent to check on his other contributor. He spun around on the bench, touched the floor at his feet, and called for Tiggy with The Voice. The elf appeared a few seconds later wearing a very pleased expression.

"Mister stone speaker Harry Potter sir is calling Tiggy?" he said in a squeaky voice.

Harry blinked at that honorific, and said "How we just shorten that to Harry, okay Tiggy?"

Tiggy nodded so fast his ears flapped a bit. "No problem, Harry sir."

Harry nodded, although it disconcerted him a bit to be called 'sir'. "Will everything be ready for our little function tomorrow morning, Tiggy? No problems I hope?"

Tiggy shook his head vigorously and said "No problems, Harry sir. We'ze be having it ready at half after seven for the early comers, sir. Mister Filch and Bilby has cleaned the room already!"

"That's great, Tiggy. Thank you for your help, and please thank Bilby too."

"Harry sir is a great wizard to thank the elves for doing their work! We're happy to help, Mister Harry Sir. Do you be needing anything else, Harry sir?"

"No, that's all, Tiggy. Thanks very much."

Tiggy sketched a bow in his direction, then snapped his fingers and disappeared. Harry liked the antics of the slightly mental but enthusiastic elf.

Twenty minutes later found Harry ensconced in a high-backed leather chair on the second floor balcony of Ravenclaw Tower, with the Dueler's Handbook tucked inside an oversized Potions text. He devoured two more chapters of that, and switched to a borrowed copy of Newton's Principia, which he was finding to live up to its excellent reputation. An hour later he switched to revising his notes for the day and the week, using the potions text as a makeshift desk. Some time later he lost two quick games of chess to Terry, and after some idle chat with Lisa and Hermione, decided to call it a night.

He arrived in his dorm to find it dark and quiet. He stoked the fire up again, and lit a few of the lamps to provide a soft illumination. The light was then adequate for him to see, by and notice...that Hammond's things were all bespelled. Everything, including the bed, was charmed, or jinxed, Harry wasn't sure which. It all looked a bit odd, so Harry closed off his magical perceptions completely for a moment, and sure enough all of Hammond's things had been rendered invisible. How Clarkson had managed it was a mystery, but Harry gave the guy credit where credit was due...that was one heck of a prank. Harry wondered what invisible clothes looked like once one put them on. Did they remain invisible, which was an off-putting prospect, or did you become invisible because you were wearing them? Time would soon tell, Harry supposed. Forty minutes later Harry was reading in bed with his drapes drawn when he heard he heard the door, then Hammond's voice clearly say, "Oy!", followed by Steven's laughter.

Harry grinned into his book, and turned the page.

Author's notes:

- Thanks to beta reader faia sakura.

- Thanks for the generally great reviews. They motivate writers!
- Next Chapter: Ravens, Snakes, and Goblins, oh my.

## CH18: Ravens, Snakes & Goblins, Oh My!

A fine, steady rain had come overnight to northeastern Scotland. Harry woke a bit after six to a sharp, loud pop. Someone, probably a house-elf, had laid fresh wood on the fire, and a log was spitting as air pockets expanded within it. Sunrise was half an hour off yet, but Harry was keen to get started today. He went about his morning ablutions quietly and took himself down to the common room to read by the hearth. It was vacant at that hour, but for an elf dusting shelves two stories up with a trio of magical feather-dusters dancing around her. The huge hearth was crackling with a modest but cheerful fire, throwing off light and warmth. Harry considered that it felt more homey than... well, home.

Harry opened Flitwick's goblin-language compendium once more, and set about committing another chapter to memory. The occlumency exercises really were helping his focus and recall; Harry considered that now he only need read a chapter twice or thrice to have it memorized. The exercises themselves were exacting, though, and combined the practice of compartmentalizing one's thoughts with holding one's magic "in mind". Harry found the latter to be literal; it worked best for him when he kept a small cloud of his own blue magic sitting right behind his eyebrows.

Harry admired how Flitwick had documented not just the structure and sound of the language, but also provided context in the form of notes on Goblin social norms and culture. The language was a lens for their culture, and Harry was getting a rare glimpse: they were bloodthirsty, shrewd, and occasionally brilliant.

The old grandfather clock near the hearth chimed once for half-seven, and Harry closed the book with a sigh. He strolled upstairs to return it to his trunk, and noticed his dorm-mates were all up and about. Clarkson was complaining a bit about getting up 'so bloody early on a Saturday' as he stumbled towards the toilet in a nightshirt, but he was up and moving.

"You're coming down to Penny's thing, then?" Harry asked Hammond.

"Yeah, mate. Wouldn't miss it. Got to support the House, and all that."

"I'm sure Penny appreciates it. I do, too," Harry said with lopsided smile.

"No worries," Hammond said. "As long as there's food, I'll show up," he answered with a grin.

Harry glanced to the definitely still invisible bed in Hammond's corner. He tilted his head in that direction and asked with a laugh, "How'd you sleep?"

Hammond answered with humor, "Fine actually. I had to climb in with my eyes closed, but that sort of worked out, 'cause I sleep with 'em closed, anyway."

"Didn't trip you up, then?"

"Nope," Hammond said jovially.

"And the clothes?"

"Erm...yeah. You could see right through 'em. Had to charm over these," he said, pulling at his shiny black robe. "Not quite sure what'll happen when my charm runs out, though; suppose I'll hope for the best." Harry and Steven both laughed. At the end of her long string, Wanda puffed herself up into a spiky little ball; apparently she didn't much like that plan.

"Oy," Harry groaned. He stepped over to his trunk and pulled out a clean robe. He handed it to Hammond, and said "Wear that, just in case. With your luck you'll be in the Great Hall when your charm collapses!"

Hammond went a little pale. He accepted the robe, thanked Harry, and switched it for his own. Upon joining them, Clarkson was mildly disappointed at the circumvention of his prank, but recovered nicely when Steven mentioned he could always lift the robe with a wingardium at the right moment. Clarkson grinned, and Hammond went pale once more, which prompted the other three to chuckling.

The four boys and their fishy escort trooped downstairs and found three of the first-year girls waiting for them. They exchanged their usual greetings, and this morning Wanda too did a little vertical loop in greeting. She then preceded to keep station over the much taller

head of Kelly Bloom as Steven stood next to her. Harry wondered if maybe that charmed fish was getting smarter. He had never asked how they kept that charm alive...

"No Padma?" Steven asked.

Lisa shook her head, and answered "She said she'll come next week. Claims she needs her beauty rest." Hermione and Kelly both snorted at that, which amused Jeremy and Harry quite a lot.

Terry Boot soon joined their number, as did one fifth-year boy Harry only recognized by sight, and two other fourth-year girls. Harry reckoned that made eleven from Ravenclaw alone. They did proper introductions, and then the group descended en-masse to the second floor, room six. Harry was rather surprised to find bright, warm light streaming from the classroom and casting an illuminated oval across the hallway. The sounds of conversation and laughter drifted towards them.

Eagerly, Harry turned into their new room. He found it transformed utterly from their visit the day before. Everything was clean, firstly, and the miscellaneous furniture had been removed. Someone had transfigured the standard school chairs into overstuffed club chairs like those in their common room, Harry noted, and had pulled most of them into three wide arcs facing the large, bright, leaded windows. Harry remembered it had been raining outside, and goggled a bit at the windows, which showed a bright summer afternoon scene despite the rain outside. He really did love magic, sometimes. A large, brown leather couch sat at an angle below the windows, and an actual wheeled chalkboard sat adjacent to the couch in wide vee. An oriental rug had been set underfoot to create a sort of common-room feeling that was very different indeed from a typical classroom setting. 'This will do swimmingly', Harry thought.

His eyes widened a bit when he saw who was sitting on the couch: Prefect Penny was there talking to both Daphne and Tracey. Nearby, Stephen Cornfoot was talking quietly with Flitwick himself. Harry supposed that's where the cool windows and chairs might have come from. The deputy headmistress was also present, and stood engaged in conversation with Aurora Sinistra and Anthony Goldstein just in front of a long refreshments table. It was bedecked in red bunting for the occasion, and looked rather festive. Three large trays

of pastries and bowls of fruit were interspersed with trays holding teapots and carafes of hot and cold drinks.

"Coffee! Yea!" Harry heard Lisa say as she scooted past him to the table.

"These are the best scones ...," Clarkson said thickly, then swallowed, and added "...in the world!" He smiled as he licked a bit of chocolate from a finger. He seemed well pleased, and turned back for another.

Harry fixed himself a cup of tea, selected an orange, and glanced down the table the end, where Tiggy stood quietly. The elf noticed as Harry stepped closer.

"Tiggy, this is excellent! Very well done. Thank you so much, really."

The little elf blushed, sort of, and said "You'ze very welcome, Mister Harry sir. Tiggy charmed the platters to stay warm, so's the cakes and scones will be delicious."

"Well done, really. Please thank all the elves who helped, yeah?"

"Tiggy will, Mister Harry sir. We's always happy to help. All the elves are being hearing you when you thanked them, yesterday. We'ze not had a stone-speaker talk to all of us in a long, long time, Mister Harry sir. All the elves are very happy to hears it again!" Tiggy said with a wildly enthusiastic nod of the head.

Harry thought about that for a blink, and figured that warranted a bit of following up at a later date. He supposed that of the thousands of wizards to come through here, a few must have tried something similar at some point. So, he had rediscovered the spell, then, rather than creating it. Harry decided that was fine, as long as it worked. He wondered if those other speakers also had magical sight; perhaps that what prompted the idea for them, too.

Several more students filed in as eight o'clock neared; Ernie and Justin were among them. Harry shook with both of them, as was their custom by now.

"Thanks awfully for coming, guys. I'm certain Penny appreciates it, and we do, too," Harry said, gesturing to the room at large.



"I wouldn't miss it," Justin replied. "Might learn something, you never know."

"I hope to," Harry said. "Say, Ernie, might you have an hour later to let me pick your brain about a bit of this and that?"

Ernie nodded, recalling their agreement earlier in the week. "Sure, Harry," he said. "How about tonight after dinner? Say eight o'clock?"

Harry agreed, saying "Great; we'll meet here." Ernie gave him a nod, and the three chatted idly for a bit until Harry saw Hermione gesturing to him. He excused himself and approached her and Penny. Both were in muggle clothes that morning, a fact that had become apparent when they'd shucked their robes.

"Morning, Ladies. What's up?" Harry asked, taking a sip of his tea.

"We think we're about ready to get started. Since this was all your idea," Hermione said, "we think you should sort of introduce the lecture."

"Do I have a choice?" Harry said, looking around at the nearly twenty people in the room.

"NO," both girls answered together. Penny smiled beatifically at him, and said, "Don't fancy speaking to groups, Harry?"

Harry rubbed the back of his head with his free hand, which made his hair stand up even more, and replied, "Er...not really."

"Oh, go on, Harry. It's your idea, after all. Just say what you said to us at dinner a few nights ago," Hermione advised. She took his teacup from him, set it down, turned him around by the shoulders, and gave him a helpful little shove out to the center of the carpet. Someone, probably Penny, tapped a glass with a spoon four or five times, and the room quieted down. All eyes swung to him. Harry swallowed hard, blinked, and said what came to mind.

"Hello, everyone. Please make yourselves comfortable in these excellent chairs. Thank you, professors," Harry said with a nod to McGonagall and Flitwick, who toasted him with his teacup. "Welcome to the first in a series of occasional lectures on different

aspects of magical society." He noticed Daphne's eyebrow rise at that; apparently she hadn't been told the full scope of the agenda.

"We'll be organizing informal speaking engagements like this several times a month, to hear about different topics of interest that aren't covered in our standard classes. Topics will include wizarding culture, wizarding medicine, wizarding law and politics, and of course, wizarding sport," He gestured to Hammond and Clarkson as he spoke the last, and got a little "hurrah" back in return.

Harry continued, "You're welcome to come to any or all of them. This is an informal chat, not a class, so feel free to get up and walk around as needed, or refill your drinks. Tiggy will come 'round occasionally with refills for coffee and tea. This week we have a topic I am personally very interested in, namely, learning how to live in magical society after being raised muggle."

Harry's face turned sober, and he said, "As most of you know, I grew up without parents. I lived with my aunt and uncle in an ordinary muggle house in Surrey. In fact, I didn't learn I was a wizard until my Hogwarts letter arrived. I expect the other muggleborn and muggle-raised students here had similar experiences." Harry saw many nods around the room, but missed McGonagall's closed eyes and pursed lips. "To put that in perspective for those of you raised in wizarding households, image if you were to receive a letter on Monday that said, 'Congratulations, you are to live the rest of your life as a muggle, starting tomorrow. How would you do it?' He saw Flitwick's head tilt and Daphne's eyes go wide for a blink, as that idea sunk in. "That's sort of what it was like for us."

Harry pitched his voice a little higher and said, "Perhaps you have a muggle or muggleborn parent. In that case, you may have a foot in each world, so hearing what Penny Clearwater," He turned and gestured to the girl behind him, "has to say might do you some good, as well. Before I turn things over to her, I want to mention that next week's lecture will be from prefect Anthony Goldstein," Harry gestured to Anthony, who waved back," who grew up in a wizarding household, and has since taken several lengthy excursions into the muggle world. He can offer you the pureblood perspective on experiencing the muggle world first-hand."

Harry saw Ernie's face scrunch in unspoken question. "Why should you care, you may be wondering?" Harry held up a hand and began

ticking off points. "Firstly, so if you ever find yourself there by accident, you won't panic. Perhaps you just want to visit the best stores or restaurants in London. Perhaps you'll need to visit a distant relative one day. Perhaps you might want to take a vacation, or disappear for a bit - or search for someone who has. Perhaps you want to see the world's best art or science for yourselves. Over 99% of the world population is muggle, and they'd done some remarkable things in the last century. Perhaps you'll want to go see the craft they used to visit the moon." Harry loved that little bombshell; he saw a half-dozen surprised expressions on various young faces. Aurora Sinistra smiled a slightly from her chair near the back.

"So next week, Anthony will discuss surviving and enjoying a muggle outing. Right now, Penny Clearwater is going to speak to us about the challenges facing muggle-raised witches and wizards, and how she integrated successfully into magical society. I'll ask that you hold your questions 'till the end, please."

Harry gestured to his left, and said "Penny?"

Penny strode to the center of the carpet, gave Harry a pat on the shoulder, and thanked him for the introduction. Harry made to exit left, but Hermione had crept off the couch to snag his sweater at the back. She hauled him straight backwards, his arms cartwheeling, to an ungainly landing on the couch. This drew a good laugh from the crowd, and caused Penny to turn around. The whole room looked with her.

"Oy!" Penny said humorously, "Park it, you two!" The two blushing Ravens did. Penny turned back to the group, many of whom were still munching on breakfast, and said "Do you mind if I get comfortable? This will take awhile." The crowd easily agreed, so Penny settled into the end seat of the couch, and folded her legs up under her. She glanced at her notes, and began "Well, my experience with all things magical started when I got letter one day..."

Penny talked for well over ninety minutes, and she had a gift for stories. Her experiences were hilarious, disturbing, frightening, and most of all, educational. Half of those attending were taking notes by the end, including surprisingly the Deputy Headmistress herself. Penny described arriving at a sort of hybrid life where she could spend one day as a muggle and the next as a witch, and move back

and forth between the two 'mindsets' at will. This was possible, she explained, because of her very understanding parents, who tolerated magic and cauldrons and owls in their muggle home. She made the excellent analogy of speaking two completely different languages, and becoming fluent in both. She also surprised a great many people when she observed correctly that muggle society had continuously evolved, whereas wizarding society was stuck with medieval technology because it was considered easier to do most everything by magic.

They had allotted thirty minutes for a question and answer period, and they easily ran long. To Harry, the most interesting parts were Penny's observations of where she preferred the magical way versus the muggle way. In response to one question, Penny answered that some things were definitely better from the muggle world, including the clothes shopping, actually brushing one's teeth, muggle music, and seeing a film. [AN1]

Penny was calling on raised hands for questions, and at the eighth or ninth, a well-fed Clarkson asked, "Was that true, what Harry said about the muggles going to the moon?"

"Yes, Indeed - before you were born, even. The Americans sent craft up in... when was it, Harry?"

"The first moon landing was in 1969. They stayed for nearly a day, walked around, collected some rocks, and then came home. They went back five more times, and even hit a few golf balls. "

"Really?" McGonagall exclaimed in surprise, which drew a round of chuckles from those assembled.

"Yes, ma'am, on my magic," Harry said with a grin.

At ten-fifteen they officially adjourned, and Harry had the sense the real audience for this - the muggle-raised kids, had got some of what they needed; advice, yes, and also the sense that they were not alone in straddling two very different worlds. Penny still had a little crowd of people around her, and seemed to enjoy the big sister role. A hand tapped him on the shoulder, and Harry turned to find Tracy Davis there, with Daphne just behind. Tracy said, "Well done, Potter; this was time well spent. I had my doubts, but you pulled it off."

Harry rubbed the back of his head once more, and said "Er...thanks. Penny did most of the talking, though, so-"

"Please," Tracey cut him off, "...we know you put this together. It took brains and ambition; we recognize that," Tracy said, tilting her head towards Daphne as she did.

"Right...well, thanks", he said with a nod. His eyes shifted to Daphne's dark green ones. "So this is where the first-year Study Club will meet, every weekday. It's mostly just the Ravens and a few 'Puffs at the moment. You two are welcome here whenever it's open. I figured it might be less partisan than your common room."

"You've no idea," Daphne said. "This place would be a major step up."

"No one hassles anyone in here, that's the rule. Anyone who tries answers to Lisa or me. I'm working on getting a potions table moved in here, and some reference books, and maybe some snacks in the afternoons. Sort of an island of normalcy," Harry added.

Daphne looked at him for a moment, and then said "You're really making a go of it. We appreciate the invitation, Harry. We'll see how it goes for a few days. But thank you, regardless, for making an effort on our behalf. It's appreciated." She touched him lightly on the shoulder as she said that, which surprised both Harry and Tracy.

"We need to go, for now. See you around, Potter. And...thanks," Tracey said. Harry nodded to her. He shared a longer look with Daphne, and then he said quietly, "Yeah...see you soon." She graced him with a little smile, and turned to follow Tracy out the door. Steven Cornfoot departed soon after, talking animatedly with Terry about something.

Looking to be helpful, Harry began to walk around restoring empty chairs to normal, and deriving a significant magical recharge in the process. He tapped his wand to one chair and drew the magic off of it, then the next. About five chairs in, a familiar Scots burr said, "Well done today, Mister Potter. Your lecture idea proved to be a hit."

Harry looked to his left. "Thank you, Professor. I'm pleased that Penny had a receptive audience."

"Indeed, Miss Clearwater had quite the tale to tell about her experiences, good and bad. It has given me a good deal more to think about, as regards your other requests."

"Ma'am?" Harry said, absently tapping another chair to restore it.

"I am beginning to believe that you are in fact correct, and we do not adequately prepare our muggle-born students for their immersion into the magical world."

"I'd have to agree, Ma'am. Do other schools handle it differently?"

Minerva squinted briefly at him, and then said "I really don't know, Mister Potter. ...Perhaps I'll see if I can't find that out."

Harry nodded. "Sounds like a good place to start, Ma'am." Minerva patted him on the shoulder as well, and said quietly, "Well done today, Harry," as she stepped past him. Harry dropped his head, and grinned. He'd never had so many people proud of him, ever.

He went back to restoring chairs, and Hermione joined him from the opposite end of the row. In short order, they had all the chairs back to normal and organized in four circles of eight in the different corners of the room, each with a little table in the middle. Some of the furniture was mismatched, but Harry didn't care; it made the place feel less formal and more like a substitute common room. The couch and rug they kept in place, and with the addition of a low table in front, it created an almost-living-room under the windows.

Professor Flitwick made time to come by and say a few congratulatory words to both Penny and Harry for their respective roles. He assured Harry they would discuss it more later, but the reaction of the staff in attendance had been wholly positive.

Tiggy had vanished the remaining food and drink at some point, and then disappeared herself. Harry touched the wall briefly and sent her a thank-you. Elsewhere in the castle, the little elf danced a jig when he heard her name come rolling across the stones. Another work song started up in the kitchen, praising Tiggy's hard work. The little elf grinned her biggest grin ever.

Soon enough it was just Lisa, Hermione and himself left. Harry said, "I'd call today a success, eh?"

"Definitely," Lisa said. "I didn't know half of the things Penny brought up today. She's figured this stuff out already. I want to know what she knows!"

"Same here," Hermione chimed in.

"Me too, actually. I learned quite a bit today," Harry said. "Three cheers for team Turpin."

"We did good!" Lisa said with a nod.

"Yeah we did," Harry said, and raised his palm for Hogwarts' second official high-five. Hermione got one immediately after.

The trio doused the magical lights and pulled the door behind them. Hermione performed a simple locking charm, which prompted Harry to suggest they have a teacher set a password on the door. The girls readily agreed. 'Another thing for the list,' Harry told himself with a sigh.

Ten minutes later, Harry spotted his favorite diminutive professor headed down the west hall. He approached the Charms Master and said in tentative Gobbledegook, \ May we speak in private, sir? \

Filius looked at him with hint of surprise, which warmed to approval. \Not bad, Harry. Follow me,\ he replied.

Flitwick turned into a nearby empty classroom. Finding the room quite warm, he shucked his outer robe, laying it over the nearest chair-back. He then cast his standard privacy charm, which by now Harry recognized for its curtain-of-beads appearance.

"What was it you wanted to speak to me about, Harry? Good pronunciation, by the way. "

"Thank you, sir - the sound charms in your book are brilliant."

Flitwick smiled. "And?"

"Sir, I need to ask, are you familiar with the muggle term 'plausible deniability'?"

"...No, I cannot say that I am. I take it to mean that denial can be plausible?"

"Yes, Sir... for example, you can't be expected to know someone else's plans if they never discussed them with you. You can plausibly deny knowing anything about them."

Filius rubbed the side of his face with one hand, and looked at the boy who had made his life so very interesting of late. "...I see. And what discussion may I deny any knowledge of, exactly?"

"If, hypothetically, a random student had important business at Gringotts, and said student had requested a round-trip portkey on a weekend, would that technically be against the rules, professor?"

Filius studied the ceiling for a moment, and sighed. He looked back to Harry, and said, "Officially, students under third year are not permitted to leave the castle grounds unsupervised for any reason. It's for your own safety, Harry."

"I understand, sir, " Harry answered, intentionally conveying comprehension, not compliance. "But neither having business at Gringotts, nor possessing a goblin-made portkey are specifically against the rules, correct?"

Filius arched a single eyebrow, and said with a shade of color to his voice, "Correct."

"Then, sir, I am offhandedly mentioning that I have future business at Gringotts, whenever I may get there next. Coincidentally, I was wondering if you had time for a chat this afternoon, say around four o'clock. If I get...distracted, would you come and find me, sir?"

Filius studied him for a long moment, contemplating possibilities. Harry looked back, anticipatory but silent. Finally, the man huffed and shook his head. Filius thought 'Very Slytherin of you, Harry.' He said out loud, "Ah...yes, I think four o' clock would be fine. Do stay out of trouble today, Harry. I shall come collect you myself if you're late."

With a relieved breath, Harry replied "Brilliant, Sir, thanks."



Flitwick nodded and said, "When next you go to see the Goblins, take this." He crossed back to the chair, and from the inner edge of his own robes he removed a small, silver cloak pin. Harry had not see it before; it took the form of a dagger with an oval-shaped emerald embedded in the handle. It was perhaps six or eight centimeters long, with two silver battle-axes crossed behind it. He pressed it into Harry's hand, and said "It proclaims the wearer a friend of the Goblin Nation. They are understandably rare," he added with understated humor. "The goblins will recognize it, and presume that you may be trusted, Harry. Do nothing to make them think otherwise. Should they ask about it, say this: 'One you trust bestowed it upon me.' It may open a few doors for you."

Harry shook Flitwick's hand, and said quietly, "That's very generous of you, Sir. Thank you. I'll see that you get it back soon."

Filius nodded, and said "Officially of course, I don't know anything. See you this afternoon. Luck, Harry."

At twelve-thirty that afternoon, Harry excused himself from the lunch table and declared his intention to take a long walk followed by a nap. His excuses made, he took himself back to his quarters, where he laid out the clothes he'd mentally selected for the occasion. It wasn't every day that one formally introduced themselves to the Goblin Nation. Harry started with black trousers, a dark green silk shirt and a black leather vest, both of which he'd bought in Diagon but not yet worn. One of his gleaming silver knives hung at his right hip in a transformed leather sheath; that had taken a few tries to get right, but Harry was pleased with how it turned out. His heavy black winter cloak, worn open over his shoulders and tied at the throat completed the look. Or, nearly did so; Harry's toes wiggled free in his black cotton socks. He got a brainwave and borrowed a pair of heavy boots from Steven with a note. Harry charmed them black temporarily with Flitwick's all-purpose color-change spell, and stepped into them. He pocketed his trust vault key, glanced at the time, and checked himself over in the half-mirror in the bathroom. He thought he looked...good. 'About as serious as a short eleven-year old can, I suppose,' he told himself. He added the pin Flitwick had given him to the left breast of his cloak. On a whim he attempted the color-change charm for grey on the left lens of his eyeglasses, and it tinted the glass nicely. Harry did the other side too, and figured he would drain the spell when he wanted them clear

once again. Wearing his most serious-looking outfit and makeshift sunglasses, Harry Potter was ready to meet the Goblins.

Harry removed himself to the shower stall of their bathroom, figuring that was a fairly safe place to reappear in mid-afternoon. He held the goblin portkey-letter in both hands, knowing only generally what was about to imminently occur. Apparently normal, wizard-made portkeys didn't work through the wards of Hogwarts, but the goblin ones were able to, somehow. Harry wondered what the difference actually was, and whether the experience was any different between the two. He bent his knees, just as the books said one should.

Those books did not do the experience justice, Harry decided. To his perception, a miniature star folded into existence right in front of him, shedding light, sound and magic at a furious rate. A corona of cold white light exploded outwards from the mini-sun, then collapsed back in again almost immediately. Harry felt himself...fold, as the space around him compressed in a sliding, overlapping spiral of magic. Without warning, the miniature star launched itself at the sky. A huge pull grabbed him, and the shriek it made whilst rending space was phenomenal. Approximately eight seconds later the process reversed, and Harry felt gravity reassert itself as his feet hit a smooth, hard floor. He wobbled once, and closed his eyes for a moment to fight back an acute sense of nausea. Exerting his self control, he took a steadying breath, then slowly straightened his spine and opened his posture. First impressions were important. He exhaled slowly through his nose.

"Step through," a deep, rasping voice said from his left.

Harry schooled his features, ticked his eyes open, and took in the sights before him. He was standing in a small rectangular area of the bank floor cordoned off by wooden balustrades. A wide, hinged gate was being held open in front of him. The hand holding the gate belonged to a goblin, looking fierce and competent in polished golden armor. On his back he wore a huge double-bladed battle axe, and his right hand held a spear taller than either of them. His eyes roved over Harry, checking details, body language and posture. His gaze stopped on the pin Harry wore for a moment, then tracked up to Harry's face. Harry made eye contact, which was mildly unnerving. He nodded at the goblin, and glided slowly out of the portkey reception box.

"Tach de, wasūk," Harry said quietly. ('Thank you, warrior.`')

The goblin had no reaction other than a small squint of its left eye, followed by a short, breathy growl. Harry was mildly surprised to recognize this as growl number three, the growl of acknowledgement, which roughly translated to 'your presence is less annoying than usual'. Harry tried his best to send back the sharp, back-of-the-throat grunt that meant 'you, too.' Apparently it was intelligible, because both of the goblin's eyes widened fractionally, and his scowl turned up slightly. He nodded his golden helm towards the right. Harry broke eye contact and glided forward with carefully measured steps.

He began to walk the length of the lobby, parallel to the long marble counter with its 13 teller stations. When he had covered approximately two-thirds of the distance, an older goblin of slightly taller stature stepped out from a side door and caught sight of Harry. He carried a stack of manilla-looking folders in one hand, and wore human-style pants of charcoal grey with a matching suit-vest. A pinstriped shirt bedecked with a crimson tie and mirror-polished black shoes set him off as a manager. 'He looks every bit the successful banker,' Harry thought.

Harry met the goblin's eyes and nodded once again. The nod was returned. Harry very carefully did not speed up his pace; he wanted to exhibit self assurance and self control today. Griphook studied him as he approached, taking in the posture, the famous scar, the pin; and the knife, openly worn. In another moment or three he was close enough that the goblin said,

"Welcome, Mister Potter. Griphook," and extended his clawed hand.

Harry shook, kept the eye contact, and said carefully in his deepest speaking voice, "Gahn safáhd, subakh Griphook." ('good afternoon, elder Griphook`')

Griphook's brow lowered a bit and his dark eyes gleamed at Harry.

"\\You Speak?" he asked in deep, guttural Gobbledegook.

"\\ A little, yes. Out of respect for the Góbalin Nation," Harry answered, careful to use their own pronunciation. Griphook rewarded him with a truly sinister-looking smile that Harry

understood to mean he was pleased. 'So far, so good, then,' Harry thought. Neither he nor Griphook saw the nearest bank teller watching them out of the corner of his eye. Goblin hearing was excellent.

Follow, Griphook said. The word 'please' was seldom used by goblins in their native tongue; an implicit chain of command existed in a military society. Harry did so, and they passed under the intricately carved frame of a high, narrow stone door into an equally tall and narrow corridor, lined with dark wood paneling. Paintings and the occasional lit scone hung on the walls. The space was barely wide enough for two goblins to walk shoulder to shoulder. That was probably the intention, Harry realized; easier to defend, and to hold off superior forces if necessary. It largely negated any numerical advantage on the part of the attacker. Very clever.

They turned a corner, and ornate metal doors lined the next dimly lit hallway at intervals, all of them closed. Harry saw spells lining the doors, in different shades of bright green, black and silver. The black spells undulated in Harry's sight, like snakes coiling over one another. It gave him the creeps, a bit. Ahead of them a similarly dressed goblin stepped out of one such door with a stack of folders under one arm, and pulled the door closed behind him with a resonant 'thoom.' The other goblin proceeded towards them, and Harry noticed that he was the tallest one there, if only by an inch. 'First time that's ever happened,' he thought wryly.

The approaching goblin squeezed past Griphook, and Harry realized he himself was occupying most of the hallway. He said Ngol, subakh ('pardon, elder') and turned sideways against the wall in order to make a bit more room. The second goblin shuffle-stepped passed with his arms full of papers, muttering tach de as he did. He got one step past Harry, stopped mid-step and turned back with wider eyes to glance again at the young wizard. Harry met his eyes for a beat, and the goblin lifted one lip in a miniature snarl that Harry knew from his book to be akin to an amused smirk for humans. The goblin turned away and resumed his pace. Griphook gave a subtle head tilt of what Harry interpreted to be amusement, and continued down the hall once more.

They stopped at one of the many decorated golden metal doors, this one etched in bas reliefs of amazing detail and intricacy. The whole door was one huge mural of a battle scene, replete with giants,

archers, dragons, and of course goblins. A mesh of faint yellow cobweb-like lines - a ward, Harry presumed, overlaid a translucent crimson lattice that pulsed with power.

"Only two spells on the door, elder one?" he asked in Gobbledegook. Griphook looked at him with no discernible change in expression, but his eyes gleamed fiercely.

"Two is enough. One for alarm, one for taste of dragon's breath - so hot even the bones explode," he said with an odd tone of...pride. Harry nodded, making a mental note to never, ever touch a door that looked like this one did right now.

Griphook did just that; he laid one long-nailed hand on that lethal door, and Harry saw a pulse of purple magic leave his hand and ripple outwards over the surface. The yellow ward went to a presumably dormant gray. He pushed the door open with a casual shove, and gestured for Harry to enter.

Harry did so, and found an office organized around a large, low wooden desk. Shelves lined three of the walls, full of books, stacked scrolls, and various trinkets. The fourth wall held a large display of weapons mounted on the bare stone wall, each of them well used. Some had rust-colored splatters on the blades, that Harry concluded probably weren't in fact rust. A large, dented shield and coat of arms hung over what appeared to be a refreshments cart. Harry approached the desk; it was huge, and piled with short stacks of folders at both ends. Incongruously, an ornate, old-fashioned handled telephone sat on one side, crafted of ivory and brass. It had no wiring, so Harry assumed it was decorative. 'Would it even work in here?' Harry wondered.

"Take a seat, Mister Potter," Griphook said, switching back to English. Harry presumed that was his usual mode of doing business. Griphook took his own chair behind the desk, pulled a wicked looking dagger from somewhere Harry hadn't seen, and laid it on the extreme left edge of his desk. He looked back to Harry, saying nothing. Harry silently thanked the stars and his own penchant for over-preparedness, because he recognized the gesture; it was a test. Harry extracted his own silver dagger, plain in comparison to the other, but nearly as large and just as sharp. He slowly and carefully oriented it with the tip and cutting edge away from the goblin, and reached out to place it on the edge of the table at his

extreme left. The theory behind the gesture was that one made a show of good faith by placing one's weapon inconveniently far away during the proceedings.

Griphook smiled more broadly, then, which even though he was prepared for it Harry found disconcerting, and more than a little ...predatory.

"Someone has taught you Goblin manners, Mister Potter." Griphook lifted a familiar letter off a pile to his right; it was Harry's own. "Your first letter was the source of some discussion," Griphook said. "We rarely get letters from Hogwarts students, much less ones that follow Goblin customs. The knife-print was an excellent touch, by the way; you made Sharptooth's day."

Harry nodded. "I offered it as sign of respect, Sir. I wish to be taken seriously despite my age."

Griphook studied him for a long breath, then growled appreciatively. "Very well, Mister Potter, you have our attention. What can we do for you?"

"Do I understand correctly that our conversation is confidential, Griphook?"

"As I am the manager of the Potter accounts, all of our conversations and correspondence are by definition confidential, Mister Potter."

Harry relaxed marginally at that, and said, "In that case, call me Harry, please, when we're speaking English."

"Very well, Harry."

"I need three things, Griphook." Harry held up a hand and ticked them off on his fingers: "Information, Access, and Knowledge."

Griphook's very long, thin eyebrow rose, and he responded, "Please explain."

"Gladly. First, information: I wish to know about the Potter portfolio, how the accounts are generally structured, the balances, recent

activity, and what if any restrictions might be in place." Griphook nodded.

"Second, access: I wish to obtain a Gringotts charge card, as your letter indicated was available to me. Also, I wish to visit all the vaults to which I have access." Griphook made a quick note and nodded for Harry to continue.

"Lastly, I want to talk about magic. Unwanded magic, in particular. I will compensate you for your time, of course." Griphook looked up at him from under a deeply furrowed brow for a long moment, and then his lip curled up in what Harry now knew to be a Goblin smirk.

"Very well. Information first," Griphook said. He shifted a folder around in front of Harry and opened it. "Your financial reports as of the first of September. " The title page proclaimed itself to be an accounting of all the assets under management for House Potter. Harry lifted it and read it quickly through: Hogwarts Trust vault, Potter Family vault, combined coin 37,322 galleons; three properties, combined value 246,290 galleons. The name Godrick's Hollow jumped out at him from all the erroneous stories of that night. This paper said the house was 'in disrepair'. Investments and holdings were itemized next, totaling nearly 44,000 galleons. 'Bloody hell,' Harry realized, 'That's a bit over a million-and a half quid! Most of that's in the properties, but still- I'm rich! or I rather will be.' [see note 3]

Harry schooled his features, noting how Griphook was studying him.

"Griphook, am I permitted to withdraw funds from the Potter family vault?" Harry asked.

"As you are still legally a minor, you would need a guardian's written permission to do so. You may, however, remove any other family possessions as you wish."

"I see...and the trust vault?"

"Unrestricted," Griphook said with a slight squint at Harry.

"I would like the charge card linked to the trust vault for now, then." Griphook growled out growl number two, the growl of ascent. Without taking his eyes from Harry, Griphook leaned forward,

grasped the handle of the ancient phone - it had no wires at all, Harry noticed - and picked it up. Harry heard a muted voice answer, and Griphook barked orders in rapidfire Gobbledegook. Harry caught the words for 'card', 'Potter', and 'vault'. Griphook placed the handle back in the ornate cradle and leaned forward once again. 'Oh, right,' Harry thought. 'Magic.'

Harry spent the next half-hour plowing through the transaction records for his school vault and the Potter family vault. Harry learned that his school trust vault was maintained with a 2,000 galleon transfer from the family vault, once a year. Current balance, after Hogwarts dues and his initial Diagon shopping spree, about 363 Galleons. Harry did the maths; that was about £1,800 to last him eleven months. He could afford a bit of prudent shopping, then, including at Christmas. All the accounting appeared correct and in order as he paged through the file. Griphook obligingly answered questions as he did so. Harry came to a page with the the Hogwarts seal on it, proclaiming that his tuition payment was deducted on August 31st, as authorized by...Harry squinted at the signature, and all the leading initials: A.P.W.B. Dumbledore.

Harry's eyes narrowed. "Griphook, why is Professor Dumbledore authorizing deductions against my account?"

"He is your appointed magical guardian, Mister Potter. In your parents' absence, he is legally permitted, and in fact, required to do so."

Harry absorbed that for a moment, and asked, "Has he authorized any other deductions? From either account?"

Griphook turned the folder to face himself once again, and began rifling through the pages with a speed honed by long practice. After twenty seconds or so, the goblin answered, "I see two this year: one for the combined taxes on your properties, and one for the annual account maintenance fees to Gringotts."

"Were both legitimate?" Harry asked.

"Quite," the goblin replied dryly. He looked up and spun one page around for Harry's inspection.



"I believe you, Griphook. It's the headmaster I'm not certain I trust." The goblin's brow rose again. "It's just... he's a stranger to me, and he's dispensing my family's money. I would like to request that monthly statements of all account activities be sent to me from today forward, please."

"It shall be done," the goblin said. Harry liked the sound of that.

They completed the review of Harry's accounts and holdings, and a duplicate set of records was created at Harry's request so that he might take them with him.

Meanwhile, a small silver-colored envelope popped into existence over Griphook's in-box and settled there. Griphook lifted the envelope from where it had landed. "Your card, as requested," he said, and opened the envelope with one sharp claw. He presented Harry with a golden metal card the size of a typical credit card. Harry accepted it and studied the shiny metal. It was embossed with the word GRINGOTTS across the top, and below that, 'Harry Potter, Trust Vault' .

"Good at any wizarding establishment in Great Britain and most of western Europe," Griphook said.

"Excellent, thank you. Is there a muggle version?"

"There can be," Griphook said with a pleased snarl, " for a small fee, of course."

Harry smirked back. "Please make that happen, Griphook. You can mail it to me at the castle if necessary." Griphook wrote himself another note, and then stood. Harry likewise rose from his chair. Both reached far to their left with their right hands, and retrieved their blades. Griphook's seemed to just disappear, Harry noted, although he did not see a spell or any obscuring magic that might indicate where. Harry simply sheathed his own knife over his right hip, reverse-draw style. Griphook took a breath, then spoke.

"You have your vault key, I trust?"

"I do, sir."

"Let us go, then." He gestured towards the door. The cart ride was everything Harry had remembered it to be; fast, slightly out of control, and entirely too much fun. He whooped as they cleared an especially twisty bit, and Griphook slammed the throttle all the way down. Harry wasn't really sure what kept the old cart on the tracks at that speed, but he loved the ride. Even Griphook wore a crocodilian smile. The cart came to rest in front of Harry's trust vault, and he withdrew and even eighty Galleons using the one of the never-heavy bags on the wall. He exited the vault, and Griphook shouldered the heavy door closed. He locked it once again and gave Harry his key.

Griphook set the cart at its maximum speed once again, and this time Harry was certain they flew above the tracks at least half the time, taking turns and drops at unnerving speeds. Three full levels they wound down, and the tunnels got both wider and higher as they did. Griphook began to slow the cart after turning once more, and they glided past ten or twelve other vaults before coming to rest in front of a huge stone door whose ancient metal plaque read simply:

687

Potter

est. 1565.

Harry studied the huge stone door for a moment. 'It must weigh tons', Harry figured. Griphook approached it, lifted a hand, and Harry saw another bloom of purple magic as Griphook ran a finger down the center of the stone door. A pinpoint of golden magic began at the center of the door, and rapidly elongated into a vertical seam. With a final flash of light the halves of the door parted, and a faint breath of stale air spilled from the vault. Griphook swung the immense door open with one hand, stepped inside, and brought the lights up. Harry followed him inside for a first-hand encounter with his past.

Just inside the door sat a dozen or so large moneybags filled with coins. The frontmost bag was open, and nearly full of galleons. A little clipboard hung on the wall above the pile, with neat rows of tiny writing. Harry stepped further in and glanced around. Clearly someone had moved in a hurry, and dropped off a rather large amount of furniture for safekeeping. Harry had no way of knowing at that moment that this flotsam was the result of his parents' hasty

relocation to Godrick's Hollow, indeed these were the items they did not take with them.

Griphook remained by the door as Harry, in a bit of a daze, stepped forward. A newborn infant's crib sat before him, with a little comet painted on the side. A faded purple toy, an dragon, sat in the corner. Someone had stacked a lamp and a box of books in the crib. A worn old couch stood on end beside to it. Four or five large boxes of clothes and random possessions, hastily packed, occupied the largest portion of the vault. A faded Gryffindor jumper hung partway out of the rightmost box. Harry picked it up, surmising it must have been his Father's. Indeed, the worn tag read JCP.

Harry wandered the vault for the next ten minutes or so. He found a handful of paintings, including one of his parents, none of which moved. Boxes of books sat everywhere, which Harry found very distracting to his mission today. He concluded he would have to come back and properly inventory everything soon. He stepped around an empty wardrobe, and what he saw took his breath away.

A long wooden table sat against the rear wall of the vault, lit by three torches. A wooden book stand held a huge hide-bound book, stained with age. The cover said simply House Potter. The second he saw it, Harry decided it was leaving with him. A bit further down the table was what appeared to be a small chest of three short, wide drawers. A little golden plaque sat between the drawer pulls, but it had been rubbed smooth with age. Next to that was a small something covered with a red velvet cloth, and then a jewelry box. Incongruously, a muggle cardboard box of random things sat at the far end of the table. Against the far wall, there sat a wooden rack holding half a dozen antique swords and spears, as well as a double-bladed axe. A Potter coat of arms hung from the wall there; it was the first time Harry'd ever seen one. For some reason that struck him profoundly; he had a whole history, here; a lineage, stretching back in time.

Harry slowly walked the length of the table, running his fingers first over the book, then the black chest of drawers, then in front of the mysterious covered item and the jewelry chest. He peered in. A small tangle of golden chains sat in the bottom, along with a random assortment of rings, necklaces and earrings. One earring with what appeared to be a large ruby in it caught his eye. He figured that if it were real, it had to be worth a pretty penny. He lifted it out of the

chest, along with its mate. A faint odor caught Harry's attention, carried on a subtle current of air. He turned his head slightly to see that Griphook had joined him. Harry held the earrings aloft, and said "I shall be taking these." Griphook nodded, and Harry slipped them into his pocket.

He finished his tour of the table by peering into the odd cardboard box. It held framed pictures and photo albums, and a few smaller books. Harry caught his breath in realization; these were his parents' own photos. He wanted these, all of them. Carefully, he lifted the box from its resting place and set it on the floor between himself and the Goblin. "These as well," he said. Griphook glanced briefly into the box, but said nothing.

Harry came to the weapons display case, and idly tipped a one of the long broadswords to him. He lifted the weapon, and its wide blade gleamed in the torchlight. He examined the hide-bound hilt closely. His family crest was etched there on the pommel.

"A good weapon," Griphook said, speaking for the first time in what to Harry seemed like hours.

"You think?"

"Yes."

Harry set it back in its place, and ran his fingertips over the ancient spears to its right. Had his ancestors fought with these, he wondered? The short, wide axe with its etched engravings caught his eye. He clasped its thick oak handle and slowly lifted it clear of the rack. To his surprise, it hummed faintly in his hands.

"It's bespelled," Harry said, looking over his shoulder to Griphook.

"Indeed," Griphook said in a half-growl. It was hard to tell, but Harry thought Griphook was annoyed. "It's Góbalin forged, lakó. Sitting here for decades or more."

Harry only knew the very basics of goblin customs, but he knew that they believed that once you made something, it was yours forever. Craftsmen loaned you their products in a sort of life-long rental. By goblin custom, the items were to 'come home' after their user died. Clearly, this one had not. Harry considered it for a moment, and

decided he wouldn't have much use for a goblin war axe, other than to frighten Dudley and Vernon.

Harry shifted his grip on the weapon to high on the handle, and turned it around. He faced the goblin properly and said, "Let this go home."

Griphook looked almost surprised for a moment, and then a wicked grin spread across his face. He grasped the handle lovingly, and hefted the axe. He spun it easily in one hand. "Excellent! Grimfang will be very pleased!"

"My apologies for the delay," Harry said in English once again; his Gobbledegook was still rather spotty. "I did not know it was here."

"Obviously not," Griphook said, "but you did the honorable thing upon learning of it. I find that rare in humans. On behalf of Grimfang's clan, tach de."

Harry didn't really know what to say to that, and so he chose to nod. Knowing his time away was growing short, he crossed to the display stand where the ancient book sat. Upon close inspection, he saw a faint crimson energy along the spine. Harry attempted to open the cover, but it refused to budge. Griphook was observing, and said "It is a grimoire, Harry. It will only open for Potter blood."

"Literally?" Harry asked, looking over his shoulder. The goblin nodded. Sighing, Harry drew his knife once more, pricked the pad of his thumb, and pressed it to the corner of the book's cover. He saw a ripple of deep crimson light ripple over the book's surface, then fade away. He tried the cover again and it lifted easily. The title page, and indeed all the pages, appeared to be not parchment but actual velum. A faded, slanted script proclaimed this to be 'The Records and Historie of House Potter'. He carefully closed the cover, lifted the ancient book from its place, and set it atop the 11-year old cardboard box. He now had a lot more history homework, Harry thought wryly. He decided to leave the rest of the secrets and treasures for future trips. He hefted the box and shuffled out of the vault, weaving through the flotsam as he went.

Griphook drove them back more slowly to the upper cart station, so as not to upset the packages and cargo. They retired to his office once more. Griphook set the axe against the wall, humming faintly

to himself. He gestured to the little cart, and said "Refreshment, Harry? Tea? Water?"

"Some water, thank you."

Griphook handed him a short, thick-bottomed glass filled with water, and took one for himself filled with an aromatic, amber liquor.

"Regarding your third request," Griphook said. "I must confess to being surprised. I assumed Hogwarts taught magic with wands, exclusively."

"They do, as far as I know. I have a bit of ability with unwanded magic, and I wanted to learn it as the goblins do it. Could you perhaps recommend a teacher?"

"Really," Griphook said, doubt lacing his voice. `A human, and a child no less, with the talent?` Unlikely, he thought. Harry correctly interpreted his tone.

"Have you got a scrap of parchment?" Harry asked. Both of the goblin's eyebrows rose a bit, but he tore the bottom half off his note sheet and handed it to Harry.

"Thanks," Harry said. He held the parchment up in his left hand, and asked "...So, will this do?" Then he yanked all the heat out of his water-glass, added a portion from the air just above the floor, and concentrated all of it into a one-inch spot above his left thumb. Technically this was cheating, but Harry didn't care just then.

Griphook felt a flash of cold lance through the room, followed by a wave of heat. His very wide jaw opened slightly as he stared at the boy across from him. The water glass was frozen solid in the boy's right hand, and the parchment burned merrily in his left. 'Fire and ice, at once?' Griphook thought. `Mastering one is easy, but using both at once takes practice and control. And power! No goblin child could do that, and only a few of the elders.`

Griphook made a repeated, rasping grunt that Harry would later deduce to be chuckling. He shook his head and said "\\Very good, young wizard, very good!\\

\\Thank you, elder,\\ Harry replied. He drew the heat from the parchment to rapidly extinguish it, and for grins pushed it back into the water-glass, where it began to thaw the ice. Harry set the glass own on Griphook's desk.

"So," Harry said, "Perhaps you might help me find a teacher of magic?"

"Perhaps," Griphook said with a snarling grin. "I shall look into it for you. You are a most interesting young human, Harry."

Harry grinned. "I do my best, Sir. For your time, as discussed," he said, and slid ten ten galleons across the desk to Griphook.

"Tach de," the goblin said, and moved the coins into a drawer. "Pleasure doing business with you, young man."

Harry said next, "I wish to change some funds; shall I see a teller, or can you do that here?"

"How much?"

"A hundred pounds," Harry said, and pushed over another pair of ten-galleon stacks.

"I have it," the goblin answered. He opened a drawer and produced two £50 notes, which he handed to Harry. He pushed the galleons into a separate drawer and made a little note on a ledger by his desk. He was thorough, Harry observed.

Looking up, Griphook said, "Any other business to conduct, Mister Potter?"

"No, sir. Thanks for your time today." Griphook nodded, and pointed at Harry's shoulder.

"Your pin; it marks you as a friend to the Góbalin nation. After today, you have earned the right to wear one."

"One you trust bestowed it upon me," Harry recited.

"Ah, yes. We know of him. How is old Warhammer doing?"

Harry used every ounce of his self control to not laugh out loud. With forced calm, he said "Warhammer, sir?"

"Your professor Flitwick. Is he well?"

Harry swallowed a wheelbarrow full of laughter, and said "Yes, Sir he's very well. I have a meeting with him in, " -Harry glanced at Griphook's clock, "...forty-nine minutes."

The goblin considered Harry for a moment, reviewing what he'd learned about the boy today, what he remembered of the boy's parents, and what all the stories said about him. A long breath later, his head tipped to the side, indicating something, but Harry knew not what.

"Give him his pin back," Griphook said.

Confused and taken aback, Harry said, "Sir?"

Griphook reached into his topmost drawer, then leaned forward and placed a virtually identical pin in front of Harry.

"You have your own, now. That is my clan's stone. Any Góbalin in Britain will recognize it." Harry carefully picked up the pin; it was indeed a near twin to the one he wore, with the difference being the small oval gemstone set in the dagger's handle; this one was black over grey, a Lapis Crucifer.

Griphook cleared his throat to draw Harry's attention, and said "A word of caution: If you besmirch that honor, you'll answer to me and my much less pleasant brothers. They're not overly particular about what they eat. "

Harry mentally filed that under images he'd rather forget, but shouldn't, and said "I understand, Sir. Tach de."

"Your paperwork," Griphook said, and slid three large folders forward.

Harry stood to collect them, and added them to his very out-of-place looking cardboard box.



"Thank you for your time today, Griphook. And for everything, really. I'd like to visit again in two weeks' time."

The goblin nodded at him, and said "Come, I'll walk you out." He escorted Harry to the portkey reception area once more. Harry juggled the portkey-letter into one hand and protectively clutched the box with both arms.

"Ready, Mister Potter?" Griphook asked. Harry nodded. Griphook touched the portkey with one long claw, and growled "Cherém!"

The shrieking, folding and acceleration were just as violent the second time, and it occurred to Harry that it might be precisely because the goblin portkey had to pierce the castle wards that the magical discharge was so great. He appeared once again in his vacant dorm room shower. Harry dropped about an inch to the floor, wobbled a bit, and unclenched his eyes, arms and jaw. 'Yeesh, that's fierce,' Harry thought.

Harry exited the bathroom to find the dorm room unoccupied as well. He set the cardboard box down on his bed, and carefully transferred the contents to his trunk so he could read through them with proper care and attention. He selected one framed photo of his parents for his nightstand, and the simple act of placing it there nearly undid him. The smiling, laughing people in animated photo were becoming real to him in a way that he'd always wanted, but could never have imagined half a year ago. He had a family history, and he was determined to learn it.

Right now, though, it was nearly twenty to four, and he had a meeting with Warhammer. Alone in his dormitory, Harry Potter threw back his head and laughed out loud.

Supplementary Author's notes:

[1] As the story is set 1991, the web was not yet a widespread fact of life. In fact the web browser proper didn't really come into being until 1993, with Mosaic.

[2] Someone properly pointed out that it should have been 'Stephen Cornfoot' rather than Michael. I goofed, accidentally blending him and Michael Corner. I have subsequently fixed it in Ch17. He was wallpaper in the cannon tales, but he certainly won't be here.

[3] Money: Using JKR's estimate of a galleon being equal to about 5 pounds sterling, or ~9.5 USD at 1991 rates. I'm estimating 1991 Hogwarts dues at G1500 yearly, or around £4500 . Throw in ~G480/£2400 for twelve month's worth of books, clothes and miscellaneous expenses, and that's a G2000 yearly budget for a trust vault. I'm trying to place Harry as 'having money' but not 'super-rich'. The three properties comprise most of his total net worth, which is a little less than £1.5M/\$3M, but he can't touch most of that yet. In short, he's in limbo for a while.

[4] Harry's knife: worn on right hip, blade forward to permit a left-handed, thumb-down draw; assumes wand in right hand, knife in left.

[5] Pacing: Don't worry about the story pacing; gotta lay the foundations up front so things can fly later. I have a plan.

[6] A little goblin vocabulary, stolen from Dune/Klingon/Chinese/Other. I'm not a linguist, nor do I play one on TV. Don't take it too seriously :P

ahkra - - - - -dagger

ahkrása- - - -sword

cherém- - - -lightning

cho- - - - - spear

de- - - - -you

gan- - - - -good

geplách- - -hello

ghop- - - - hand

góbalin- - -goblin

hámman - - human

le - - - - - I, me

lakó - - - - boy, young male

mahd - - - - morning, dawn

ngol - - - - pardon

safáhd- - - afternoon

Sitch- - - - Sir

sook- - - - Him/Her/it

subákh- - - elder

tach de - - thank you

wach- - - - way, method

wasūk - - warrior (he-of-war)

yahn - - - - young

END OF CH18. Next: Warhammer, Purebloods, and Girls, oh my.

## CH19: Just Another Weekend

Harry approached his professor's office shortly before four in the afternoon. He found a note on the door, written in a language only he, his professor, and perhaps the headmaster could read here. It said:

Cherém-suhl ~

Tarn vaal de tor nikra sken. De jah. Zold etir.

– FF

Harry's lip pulled sideways, and he set about decoding it. His goblin vocabulary was still sparse, and rather biased towards his need to interact with the Gringotts staff. He had very good recall of what he'd learned thus far, thanks to the occlumency exercises, but he'd only read a third of the book. So, he puzzled out the note bit by bit.

'Cherém... that's lightning, meaning me, presumably...don't know what suhl is...Take...hall...of right... so these are directions, then...twenty somethings... my left...green door.' He pulled down the note, double-checked the wording, and said aloud, "Right. Here goes nothing, then."

Harry proceeded down the hall away from the stairs to the tee at the far end. He turned right and counted out twenty steps, passing two unmarked doors in the process, one brown, one black. At his twentieth step, he found himself even with a green door on his left side, and a black one two meters further down on his right. The door was unlabeled, but was bespelled along the floor and lock. As the wood itself was not bespelled, Harry deemed it appropriate to knock, and did so.

"One moment," came his professor's voice from within. Harry sighed internally; there was one more little test passed.

Filius Flitwick opened the door, and got an eyeful of his most interesting young student standing there in his weekend attire. The shirt of emerald silk echoed the color of his eyes; the black leather vest; The gleaming silver knife sheathed on his hip; the cloak; the boots; they all created an impression of strength and competence

very different from the generic school robes he was used to seeing the boy wear.

"Gahn safahd, sitch," Harry said with a nod. (Good afternoon, sir.)

"Hello Harry; got my note, I see. Do come in, tell me how your visit went." A crimson-robed Filius Flitwick stepped back and opened the door fully, allowing Harry to enter.

"Thank you, sir. Would I be correct in guessing that these are your living quarters?"

"Indeed, Harry, indeed. I get quite enough of my office throughout the week. I trust you won't mind if we talk here?"

"No sir, that's fine."

"Good. Have a seat," he said, indicating a small, round dining table tucked around a short half-wall from the door. Harry doffed his cloak, dropped it over the back of one low chair and took the next.

"Tea?" Flitwick's voice came from the adjoining kitchen.

"Yes, thank you," Harry called back. While the Charms Master bustled around, Harry took in the room. All the furniture was about a third to half lower than average, which Harry supposed made sense. Why tolerate furnishings too big for you? As Harry was perhaps only a half-meter taller than his professor, he fit more or less comfortably at the low table, although he did feel like a bit of a giant, which was another first for him today.

The main room featured the ubiquitous rounded outer wall, large windows, and in here, exposed wooden beams supporting plaster ceilings. The ceiling itself was a marvel, charmed to show a marvelous blue sky with faint wisps of clouds that drifted slowly across it. It gave one the feeling of sitting outside, under a gazebo perhaps, as the only thing visible above the old wooden beams was sky. It was truly brilliant, Harry thought. The walls held a trio of bookshelves, interspersed with paintings, and at the far end of the living room Harry saw a coat of arms displayed over two crossed axes. Two other closed doors led off to other rooms. It felt good here, Harry decided, rather like being outside on a nice summer afternoon.

Flitwick glided into the room, announced "Here we are," and set a tray upon the table bearing a well-used tea service. He seated himself at the north of the table, to Harry's east, and said, "Help yourself, please, Harry. Nice outfit, by the way; very mature."

Harry poured his professor's tea first, and said, "Thank you, sir. It seemed to have the desired effect."

"Which was?" Flitwick asked, stirring honey into his tea.

"Our friends took me seriously, and dealt fairly. Today was productive."

"Excellent. To whom did you speak?" Flitwick asked with interest.

Harry made to answer, but hesitated, and eyed the ceiling for a moment. "Sir, may we be overheard in here? I see wards, but I don't know what they're for."

"One moment," Filius said, and waved a spell at two of the portraits further into the room. Wooden shutters closed around both portraits with little clicks, and Flitwick said, "You're prudent to ask, Harry. The occupants of the portraits cannot hear us now. There are indeed privacy wards around all of the instructors' quarters; I have added my own as well. Our privacy is well assured."

Harry nodded, sipped a bit of his very hot tea, and said, "I met with Griphook." Flitwick nodded. "We reviewed the Potter accounts, which until today I had only cursory knowledge of, and then we visited the family vault. That was...significant," Harry added, taking another gentle sip of tea.

"Lots of memories?" Filius offered quietly.

"Not exactly, sir...I mean, yes, there's a lot of Potter family history there, but until today I didn't know anything about any of it. I have no memory of my parents." Filius seemed to sag a bit at that, Harry noticed. The man let go a long, quiet exhale.

"I did find a whole box of pictures and books of theirs," Harry said, which caused Flitwick's eyes to lift to his own. "I brought them back

with me. I intend to sort through them, and perhaps read the journals. If I had questions..." he trailed off.

"You may ask them, Harry, when you're ready, " Flitwick said, meeting his eyes. Harry nodded back.

"Thank you, sir, I appreciate that. Oh, and I found what I believe to be the grimoire of House Potter. It's appropriately ancient and severe-looking. I plan to read that second, to try to understand my own family history."

"Good for you, Harry. But a word of caution, grimoires can carry rather zealous protective magics. Don't let anyone else handle it casually."

"Noted, sir, thank you."

"Anything else of interest?" Flitwick asked.

"Two things," Harry said. "In the family vault was a goblin-forged battleaxe. Griphook seemed rather displeased to see it there."

Flitwick nodded. "You understand why that was?"

"I do, sir. Once I gathered why, I presented it to him, with a request that it go home."

Flitwick's expression went quickly from surprised to pleased. "Ah! Well done, Harry. That was a wise thing to do. How did he react?"

"He accepted it with...reverence, I guess would be the word. Then he thanked me on behalf of Grimfang's clan."

Flitwick choked on his tea. Sputtering, he said, "Pardon me...Grimfang? Are you certain he said Grimfang, Harry?"

"Yes, sir... who is Grimfang, exactly?"

"He's currently the third most powerful goblin in Britain," Flitwick said with as serious a tone as Harry had ever heard him use. "Very high up in the Goblin hierarchy; any favor for him will be remembered for years, and any slight for decades. You did a particularly wise thing there, Harry," Flitwick explained. He toasted him with his teacup,

and pushed a small plate of shortbreads towards Harry. Harry toasted him back with his own cup.

"I wasn't looking to benefit; it just seemed like the right thing to do," Harry temporized, munching a shortbread.

"It was," Flitwick responded with a pleased little smile. "So your visit was quite beneficial, then."

"Yes, sir. Griphook also bade me give you this back," Harry said, and slid Flitwick's pin gently across the table to him. "It served its purpose, thank you."

"He asked about it, then?"

"He did, and I said what you told me to say."

Flitwick nodded. "And?"

Harry broke out in a full grin. "He asked me how 'old Warhammer' was doing, sir."

Flitwick winced in recognition, shook his head, and broke into a small smile himself. "Let the cat out of the bag, did he?" Filius asked, amused despite himself at Harry failing to control his chuckles.

"Really, sir? WARHAMMER?" Harry said with mirth.

"Indeed, Harry, Indeed," Flitwick said with a little nod. He took up his wand and waved a spell at a little table in the corner. A drawer opened, and a leather-bound book floated over to him. He cracked it open, and Harry saw it was an album of sorts, full of newspaper clippings, photographs, and bits of cloth Harry recognized as military insignia. He fished a small picture out of its holder and passed it to Harry.

Harry accepted it gently and held it up to study it. It was an old wizarding photograph, faded now with age. The grainy black and white image showed a much younger Filius, aged perhaps twenty-five, dressed in wicked-looking goblin armor. He held a helm under one arm, and the other arm balanced on a large, spiked warhammer nearly as tall as he was. The rakish smile on the young man's face gleamed nearly as bright as the armor he wore. He looked young



and confident, like he could move the world. Harry grinned at the picture, and then looked back at Filius.

Flitwick's smile faded as he handed him a second picture. In this one, two goblin warriors stood on either side of him, all of them armed and armored. They were streaked with mud and blood, and looked like they had just climbed back from some deep pit of hell. Even worn and battle-weary, they looked fierce and deadly serious. A handwritten label at the bottom of the photo read, 'Hürtgenwald, February, 1945.' The hard and haunted look in the eyes of the man in the photo was light-years away from the Flitwick he knew.

Filius said, "You should understand, Harry, I was a very different person fifty years ago -young, rash. I had embraced the warrior ethos, and when the first dark lord came, I fought. All of Europe was fighting then, wizard and muggle alike. "

"World War Two," Harry said. Flitwick nodded, his expression grim.

"I fought along side the Goblins when I could, and the wizards when I had to," Flitwick said. "Those were very dark times." Flitwick tapped the photo with a finger. "We were malach al-mut, all three of us. We did what we had to, as we pursued Grindelwald across Europe. Fortunately Albus was able to carry the day, at the end."

Harry handed the picture back, and pondered the implications of that statement. He made a mental note to look up that phrase, but he could tell from Flitwick's tone it was nothing cheerful. After a moment he said, "And then peace came. Until Voldemort."

Filius replaced the photo, and took a long breath. "Yes."

"You fought then, too." It wasn't a question.

"I did. I would again," Flitwick said stridently, looking Harry in the eye as he did. Harry caught a shadow there of the death-dealer in the photograph. "Always, against evil like that. One must always stand against evil, Harry."

Harry nodded, and filled their cups once again. The room got very quiet. He reflected for a moment more, and then said, "I didn't mean to awaken painful memories, sir. I apologize."

After a long beat, Filius said, "That's all right, Harry. You had no way of knowing. It's an important part of our past, but not one those who lived through it would choose to remember in detail. You understand."

"I think so, sir. That's why I asked the deputy headmistress to consider covering those topics in our magical history classes."

"She mentioned that to me briefly at dinner yesternight. Apparently the history curriculum is rather light on the events of this century."

"You've a gift for understatement, sir," Harry replied, one side of his mouth turning up. "No one my age knows much about their recent history beyond what their parents might have told them. Those who don't know their history are destined to repeat it, sir."

"Ah."

"I thought that if perhaps Professor McGonnagall was unable to modify the coursework, we might go to plan B." Flitwick lifted one brow, prompting for elaboration. "Another Saturday lecture, sir - we'll find a journalist or a historian to come talk to us."

Flitwick sent him a small nod. "Good idea."

Harry thought he might try to end on a positive note. "I have one other bit of news regarding Griphook, sir," he said in as upbeat a tone as he could muster.

"What's that?" Filius asked, pouring himself the last of the tea, adding a splash of something amber-colored from a flask off the counter behind him.

"He gave me this," Harry said, and produced his own cloak pin. Flitwick's eyes widened fractionally, and his jaw dropped an inch. His eyes cut from the pin, and the stone thereon, to Harry's pleased expression. His voice came out in an excited squeak.

"My word! That's...That's truly remarkable. His clan are notoriously stingy with their stones. The Lapis Crucifer dagger is a rare thing indeed. You must have really impressed him! Well done, Harry."

"Thank you, sir. I'm pretty pleased with it as well."

Filius nodded. "Needless to say, keep that somewhere safe except for special occasions. And never do or say anything disrespectful to a Goblin while wearing that pin. His clan can be utterly ferocious, even among goblins."

"He mentioned that, yes. I'll do my best, sir."

"That will certainly open a few doors for you," Flitwick said, and toasted him once more with his now spiked tea.

"We'll see, sir. Time will tell."

Flitwick merely nodded. He drained the cup, set it down, and said "You wore your knife there, I presume?" Harry nodded. "You set it out of reach at the appropriate times?"

"As the book said to do, yes sir."

"Well done; I'll bet that surprised him. May I see it?" Flitwick said, extending his hand.

Harry arched a brow, but pushed his cloak back from his hip and drew and blade from its sheath. He flipped it once in his palm and handed it to his mentor, handle-first. Flitwick grasped it, and a rather familiar gleam entered his eye. "Yesss," he growled, testing the edge with his thumb. He admired the elongated, half-serrated blade that Harry's current design featured. "I remember the smaller one that Minerva showed me. This one is silver as well?" he asked, flipping it to and fro in his palm. Harry nodded. "A good choice, but softer than steel. Good for werewolves," Flitwick said as he spun the blade fluidly across the front and back of his palm half a dozen times. It rotated around his hand as if by magic. Harry tried not to goggle, and failed. Flitwick caught it, then spun it horizontally on his hand, turning quick little circles until he stopped it by snatching its handle on the fly. He flipped it in his palm as Harry had done, and handed it back. Harry accepted it carefully, still rather amazed at what he'd just seen.

"It's half a gram heavy on the back end," Flitwick said, "but a very good effort none the less; nicely done, Harry. Perhaps consider steel or chromium for your next effort." Harry simply nodded, accepting

the praise and criticism with equal deference. He put the knife away, before Flitwick surprised him any more. He also made a mental note to look up the properties of chromium. After a breath, the diminutive professor stood and began to gather the tea service onto its tray once more. Harry got the hint.

"Thank you for the tea and conversation, sir."

"You're quite welcome, Harry. I appreciate the company, on occasion." Flitwick moved the tray over to the counter, and said "Not to be rude, but I have a few things to do before dinner. Shall I expect you in my office on Tuesday night?"

"Yes, sir, I'll see you then," Harry said, rising and collecting his cloak.

"Good."

"Good afternoon, professor. Thanks for your time."

"My pleasure, Harry. Enjoy the grimoire."

"I'll try, sir."

Flitwick held the door for him as he departed. Harry gave him a final nod, and stepped into the hall. The door shut silently behind him, and the hallway seemed dim and stuffy in comparison to the bespelled sky in Flitwick's quarters. Harry shook his head, took a long breath, and descended the steps once more to the corridor leading back to Ravenclaw Tower.

Harry answered the eagle's riddle, pulled his cloak completely around him to minimize the attention his appearance might otherwise attract, and entered the warm, pleasant space of the common room. A dozen or so Ravens were relaxing there; some read, some played cards; Terry and another boy played chess. Kelly Bloom had a book to her nose and was chuckling silently at it. He recognized the cover as he glided past her; it must have been Hermione's copy of the Princess Bride that now had her in giggles. He ascended the stairs and cracked the door to his dorm, and almost wished he hadn't.

A wave of little multicolored candies piled out of the door, perhaps half a meter's worth, and pooled around his ankles. Their entire

room was knee-deep in Bertie Bott's Every Flavor Beans. There must have been a whole year's production covering the floor, right up to the walls. Harry noticed the piles got deeper around Clarkson's bed, which might explain why Hammond was standing on his trunk like a man at sea, wand in one hand and a book in the other. More candy was gushing happily out of a small, round bespelled tin sitting in the middle of Clarkson's nearly buried bed. Harry rolled his eyes.

Steven was lying casually on his own bed, an island in a sea of sweets. Wanda circled overhead, free of her tether, and weaved slowly in and out of his bedposts. She peeked at Harry from behind the canopy as he waded over towards them.

"H'llo, Steve."

He lowered his book, something about dragons. "Harry." Wanda did a little barrel roll, and Harry waved at her.

"I presume this was not intentional?" Harry asked, tipping his head towards Hammond, who was trying unsuccessfully to stem the candy volcano.

"...Couldn't say for sure, but it seems a bit overdone," Steven said dryly.

Harry snorted. Steven shrugged, and lifted his book once again. Harry waded over to Hammond; the candy was most of a meter deep at this end of the room, and the footing was highly unstable; delicious, but unstable.

"Hello, Harry," Hammond said cheerfully. "Fancy a sweet?" Harry laughed in spite of their predicament, so contagious was Jeremy's good mood.

"I'm good, thanks. So, did you botch the charm on the tin, or the candy, or both?"

"Well, I wouldn't say botched, exactly...", he replied. Harry arched both brows and looked at him. "Well, maybe a bit, perhaps...or... rather a lot, actually, yes," he said, nodding now. "I've bollocked this one up, haven't I?"

"Yeah," Harry said with a grin. "Tell you what, I'll shut it down for you, and you get rid of this mess, alright?" Hammond wilted with relief.

"Yes, please! I've been trying to get it to stop for an hour now." Harry waded forward like an icebreaker, pushing a little wave of candies in front of him, scooping them away with his hands as he went. It was slow going. After four more steps he was able to reach the side of the bed, and stretched out a hand through the little shower of emerging candies to touch the red metal tin. He pulled the magic off of it, and it came away easily, a ivory-colored spell clinging to his fingertips. The beans stopped gushing from the tin, but Harry was a bit preoccupied playing with the loose spell. He asked his own blue magic to take hold of it and break it into threads, which to Harry's perception happened quickly; the spell disintegrated into a fishing net of magic strands, then simply fell apart into motes of power and will. With a thought, his own blue magic bloomed from his palm to catch the little ivory motes, and they dissolved into a little sea of power in his palm.

"Well done, Harry," Hammond's voice came from atop his trunk. "Any thoughts on what I should do with all these Berties? Maybe toss them in the lake?"

"Nah, the fish wouldn't like em, and they'll just pollute the lake."

"...alright, so, what then?"

Harry thought for a moment. "It's still a good prank," Harry said with a gleam in his eye. "Pity you can't get them all into the Potions classroom somehow." Hammond looked like Christmas had come early.

"Harry that's brilliant! Evil, but brilliant!" Steven had lowered his book once more, and was grinning, too.

"I don't quite know how to make that happen, though..." Hammond said, tapping his chin as he thought.

"Allow me," Harry said. "Tiggy!"

The little female elf appeared a few seconds later, and landed with a little plop that sent out a wave of beans. She looked around, eyes wide, until she saw Harry smiling at her. She clapped her hands,

and said, "Mister Harry Sir, this is wonderful! You've made a playground in your room! And with sweeties too!" She popped one in her mouth and swallowed it down. "You're the bestest young wizard in the school!"

Hammond and Wright were both amused by Tiggy, having seen her briefly that morning. Harry properly introduced her to each of them, and then said, "Tiggy, we want to share all this fun! Tell me if you can help us with this..."

Tiggy got a gleam in her eye and began to nod as Harry described his plan. An hour later, all the beans were gone, and the boys were heading down to dinner.

Harry met Ernie at eight that evening in room six, or the Study Club room as he now thought of it. He carried a big, squishy bag with him when he went.

"Brilliant little 'do this morning, Harry. Nice to see things from a different perspective. Merlin, but you Ravens are clever. Penny knows more about the wizarding world than I do, practically," Ernie said.

"Well, she's a smart girl, and she's had six extra years to learn it all, right?"

Ernie's head tilted back. "Yeah, I suppose that's true. So, what shall we talk about tonight?"

"I haven't got any chocolate frogs to bribe you with," Harry said with a grin, "...but how about a few pounds of Bertie Bott's?" He placed a pillowcase half-full of candy on the desk, and opened the loose end. Ernie just goggled and the bag, peered inside, and grinned.

"Blimey, Harry! That must be six pounds of sweets!"

"Take it. Really - we've got all we'll ever need in our dorm."

"You're sure?" Ernie asked, a bit incredulously.

"Absolutely."

With a large grin, Ernie lifted the bag and set it on his lap. "Thanks, Harry, really," he said, and picked a brown one that might possibly have been chocolate from the top of the sack. He popped it into his mouth, a brief look of uncertainty crossing his face. It changed to a smile, and he mumbled, "mmm...pudding."

Harry chuckled at his friend and now, advisor. He picked a green one - spearmint, he thought. Then opened his notebook, uncapped his pen, and said, "So, pretend I know next to nothing about wizarding government, Ernie. Tell me how it works."

Ernie launched into a fairly articulate explanation of the governing body, the Wizengamot, discussing its structure, politics, and customs. One of those customs was hereditary membership.

"I expect you'll be Lord Potter when you reach your majority, Harry," Ernie said. "Unless you've got a distant relative somewhere?" he added.

Harry shook his head, and said, "So if I understand you correctly, that entitles me to a seat on the Wizengamot, and to vote on items that come before the assembly?"

"Correct. In fact, you probably have several votes, seeing as House Potter has probably inherited seats from other extinct family lines through marriage."

"Ah. So when I'm seventeen, then, I'll be eligible to take the seat."

"That's right," Ernie said with a nod. He popped a pink every-flavor bean, winced, and swallowed. Harry didn't ask.

"Assuming there's nothing stopping me, how would I claim the title as head of my family?"

"There's paperwork, of course; and you'll want the ring with the family seal, I expect. Any idea where it might be?"

"Not certain," Harry said. "Best guess, it's somewhere in the family vault."

Ernie nodded. "Your father's will didn't mention it?"



"My..." Harry's jaw dropped and his expression froze. He turned a direct, intense look in Ernie. The Hufflepuff boy looked back with raised brows. "My father's...will, " Harry said slowly. "I've never seen my parents' wills. I always assumed there were none, based on what little my muggle aunt told me. I'd bet anything they're in the Potter vault, though, or maybe on file at Gringotts. Ernie, that's bloody excellent thinking, man. Thank you for that."

Ernie looked genuinely pleased to have been helpful. "Shotgun?" he asked, holding out the bag.

"Sure, why not?" Harry answered. They each took a dozen or so Bertie's and tossed them back. It was like culinary roulette; sometimes you won big, and sometimes you lost. Tonight, Harry got a mixture heavy on chocolate and banana. As he chewed, he wrote himself a large note that simply said, 'Potter Wills.' Then they talked for another twenty minutes, mostly about what Ernie knew about wizards' relations with the Goblins. Harry asked to meet again in a week's time, and Ernie readily agreed. Harry had another letter to write to Griphook, but that could wait until tomorrow since the bank wouldn't be open until Monday.

The rest of Harry's evening was spent reading for classes, writing his assignments, and recording the day's events in his 'ideas' notebook. His absence that afternoon went unremarked, at least thus far. That night, the airplane dream returned again, and once again Harry found himself flying without the actual plane. He was soaring over the lake, and then over the forbidden forest. The moon was amazingly bright tonight, Harry noticed, because he could see every pebble on the ground, every twig, every blade of grass. Something small and furtive twitched below him, and his heart rate jumped. He banked gently right, lifting his arms to slow his speed ever so slightly. The what's-it moved again, and a little mouse hopped into view, nibbling a bit of acorn. A rush of need and adrenaline flooded his system. Instinct took over, and Harry pulled his arms in and dove, silent and fast. He could feel the wind rushing over his skin, but part of him noticed it didn't seem cold. The mouse hopped a half-meter to the left. He could hear it now, skittering across the forest floor. He flexed one shoulder and adjusted his course minutely. Five meters now; his heart was pounding in his ears...two meters...His feet went out with fluid grace, and he closed long, sharp claws around the mouse. His talons sunk into the living flesh. It twisted in his grasp, then the copper smell of blood...

"Gaahh!" Harry Potter awoke with a swallowed shout from the pulse-pounding dream. He was covered in sweat, and vaguely nauseous as his heart raced in his chest. Harry took a long breath, sipped a bit of water, and tried to calm himself down. He was safe, in his bed, in the castle... but he could still smell the blood, and feel his claws sinking into the unlucky mouse. 'Claws', Harry thought...'his very long, black claws, on feathered white legs'. Harry's head dropped back to hit the pillow, and he whispered tiredly, "Hedwig."

Sunday morning sunrise came and went, and Harry slept on. It had taken awhile to get back to sleep after the dream, and he read lightly to clear his head and bring on drowsiness once again. His roommates left him in peace, as Clarkson was also having a lie-in.

Harry rolled out of bed around eleven, and took a walk to the lake and back in the brilliant fall sunshine. Yesterday's rains had left things a bit raw, but the air was pleasantly clean and crisp. The leaves were approaching high color, and the view of the castle from the lake was stunningly fabulous.

While he walked, Harry thought. He had seen through Hedwig's eyes, somehow, experiencing what she experienced. It was the familiar bond developing, Harry supposed, but had no real information to go on. He made a mental note to check with Grubbly-Plank and Hagrid, and perhaps write to Eeyelops' and see what they knew about moderating the effects. Another mouse-hunting dream he could probably tolerate, but the experience of eating of still-twitching prey was not something Harry wanted to have. He wondered if his own morning lethargy today wasn't perhaps related to Hedwig sleeping off her midnight meal.

In his mind, he began composing his next letter to Griphook, inquiring about the wills, and also about the disposition of Grimfang's axe. Thirdly, on a hunch, he intended to ask about assay services to buy and sell precious metals. If he could transform pence into pure gold or silver discs, as he was pretty confident he could, then he could send a few at a time to Griphook to be sold. That would augment his trust vault nicely, Harry thought, as long as he kept it discreet. A child turning up with kilos of gold or silver was bound to raise questions. A few coins or ingots a month would hopefully go unnoticed. Last he checked, gold was a little over 200

quid per ounce; that meant around 40 galleons for each transformed pence.

He stepped out of the bright and breezy day into the great hall for lunch. Sunbeams cut long golden rays across the hall, and the sounds of conversation and clatter of utensils made the place seem almost homey. Lunch at weekends was quite a bit less formal than weekdays, and only a third to half of the students were in attendance. Lisa and Hermione had taken over one end of the Ravens' table along with Padma and Terry. Harry slid in next to Terry, across from Lisa. They all chatted amicably, and both Harry and Lisa readily agreed to spend the afternoon in the library helping Hermione with her 'project.'

Dinner that evening was much closer to fully attended, and Harry got his first look at the mail-order catalogues Hermione had sent home for some time ago. It seemed they would indeed be able to order packages delivered to the castle via the Hogsmeade post office. Hermione's mum had included a catalogue from JDWilliams, a department store name even Harry recognized. The catalogue said they could pay by postal order, which was fortunate as none of them had credit cards or cheque accounts yet. They decided their first order would be a french coffee press, at the combined urging of Lisa and Harry.

After dinner, Harry wrote out the letter to Griphook as planned, with the appropriately flamboyant greetings and sing-offs. He impressed it with the bloodied knife tip once again, since the odd little ritual carried such favor with the goblins.

The rest of Harry's night went to homework, then more reading on his side projects, as he now thought of them. Another chapter of the goblin text was read thrice and memorized, then he began sorting through some of the prizes from the vault. He had begun looking through the pictures, seeing his newborn self in some of the last. The remainder featured his parents from their wedding day forward. They were often surrounded by three other men in varying combinations, a thin, handsome black-haired man with a ladykiller smile, a taller man with a sad smile and brown hair; and a short, rounder man-boy possessed of unfortunate genetics. Who were these men, Harry wondered; were any of them still alive? His eye alighted on the three small books in the stack. He found them to be two of his father's journals, along with his mother's last diary. He got

no further into the photo albums or grimoire, as his full attention was consumed deep into the night with reading his lost fathers' thoughts, written in his own hand.

Author's Notes:

[1] I'll note that I got through a day and a half in under 6,500 words. I have a plan in mind for a vehicle to accelerate the pacing, soon.

[2] Yes that was a little Riddick homage with the knife.

[3] I realize 'shotgun' might be a little out of Ernie's normal parlance, but I choose to believe he learned the term from a muggle-savvy student in the context of sweets, and possibly doesn't even know the proper meaning of the word.

[4] A little goblin vocabulary, stolen from Dune/Klingon/Chinese/Other. I'm not a linguist, nor do I play one on TV. Don't take it too seriously :P

ahkra- - - - - dagger

ahkrasa- - - - - sword

ahn- - - - - -axe

bahk - - - - - -rug,tapestry

cherém- - - - -lightning

cho- - - - - - spear

chouhada- - - - spearhead

chaak- - - - - -four

darrad- - - - - gold

De- - - - - - you

derch- - - - - yours

etir - - - - - door

gan- - - - - good

geplach- - - - -Hello

gik- - - - - -five

ghop- - - - - hand

hamman- - - -human

hast- - - - - wood

le- - - - - -I, me

lk- - - - - -one

jah - - - - - left

kék - - - - - blue

kull- - - - - all

lako- - - - - boy, young male goblin

malach- - - - angel

malach al-mut - angel(s) of death

mahd- - - - - morning, dawn

mig- - - - - stick, wand

mut - - - - -death

Nik- - - - - -two

Nikra- - - - - -twenty

ngol- - - - - pardon

safahd- - - - -afternoon

sak - - - - - three

saar - - - - - -foot

Sitch- - - - - -Sir

sken - - - - - step, stride

sūk- - - - - Him/Her/it

subakh- - - - -elder

suhl- - - - - scar

suhl-wasūk- - scar warrior

Tach De - - - -Thank you

tarn- - - - - take

tor - - - - - right

vaal - - - - - -hall

vèt - - - - - see, behold

waar- - - - - war

wach- - - - - -way, method

wasūk- - - - - warrior (he-of-war)

yahn- - - - - young

zold - - - - - green

## CH20: One step forward...

The six o'clock chime woke Harry from a sound and peaceful sleep. As he showered, he planned his day: Potions was likely to be a challenge, as usual. He was eager to hear what Snape's reaction would be to all the candy. The first official meeting of the study club would hopefully be a high point. He needed to see McGonnagall about a password for the door, he realized, and that began his habitual recitation of the litany of things he wanted to accomplish today.

After dressing, Harry sent his next Gringotts letter off with Hedwig, curious to see what Griphook might know of his parents' wills, among other things. Hungry as a Dursley, Harry walked down to the great hall early that morning. He'd barely sat down when Hermione plopped herself down at his side with evident enthusiasm, and said, "Harry, look at this!" She then set a large, musty library book on his plate before he'd even reached for the eggs. He sighed silently, and reached for the coffee instead. He poured himself a cup, stirred in too much sugar, and bent over the book in question. A little pink Post-it note was stuck incongruously to the page of the ancient, leather-bound book that certainly would have found such a thing offensive, had it known. A little hand-drawn arrow on the post-it pointed to a paragraph describing the purported history of diadem of Rowena Ravenclaw.

Harry sipped his black coffee and read. The author made no claims of veracity, but stated that according to second-hand accounts, the diadem was believed to be "...an open tiara made of sterling silver inlaid with seven gems, purportedly bespelled by Rowena herself to greatly enhance the wearer's intelligence. Purportedly made..." blah, blah, Harry skimmed ...it had been taken by her daughter..." On the inside of the band were said to be engraved the words, 'Wit beyond measure is man's greatest treasure.' Harry's head rocked back at that. He glanced to his right, into the bright, triumphant eyes of one Hermione Granger. Her radiance fluttered vibrantly.

"So?" she asked. "What do you think?"

"I think you answered the first part of the riddle, Hermione. Very well done!" Harry said with a genuine smile. She responded with one of her own, and said, "Lisa agrees, too. So now we know what we're looking for! We'll talk more during the 'free' at ten, alright?"

"I'll be there," Harry said, hefting the big old book off his plate and placing it in her hands once more. He cleaned his plate thoroughly with his napkin, and then spooned himself some scramble over toast. "You should eat, too," He said.

"What? ...Oh, right, thanks," Hermione murmured absently, her head down in the book once more. Harry dropped a ladle-full of scramble on Hermione's empty plate, and handed her a fork. She harrumphed once, rolled her eyes, took the fork, and closed the book. Harry pushed a cup of tea in front of her. She took the hint. The remainder of breakfast was uneventful, save for the arrival of a letter from the Hogsmeade postmaster informing Harry that he now had his very own post office box which would accept both magical and muggle post, and forward it to the castle as required. 'Not bad for two galleons a month,' Harry thought. 'They must not do much volume.'

Transfiguration class was becoming easier now that Harry provisionally understood how to get his magic do what McGonnagall wanted. He refrained from any permanent transformation in class, as per their agreement. Today's lesson, changing sticks into metal chains, was fairly straightforward for him, and after the fourth iteration he began to vary the size and shape of the links, first big and bulky - where did the extra mass come from, he wondered? - to a chain of fine loops suitable for a necklace. "Nice," Steven whispered from the next seat. Harry gave him a little nod. Idly, Harry changed the color of the chain to black, then white, then alternating blue and silver links. That one took a lot more concentration and a derived incantation, but it worked on the third try.

"Nice charms work, Mister Potter," McGonnagall's voice came from over his shoulder, "...but do focus on the transfiguration, please."

Harry blushed a bit at being snuck-up on, again. How she did do that, he wondered. The magical animal-shape around her twitched its tail in amusement at him, even though the woman's posture and voice were as strict as ever. "Yes, ma'am. I was wondering, why it seems more difficult to transfigure some metals as opposed to others?" Harry couldn't see why asking the magic to pretend to be, say, platinum should be any more difficult than pretending to be silver.

Minerva's brows rose slightly, and she approached the front of his desk. "That's a fair question, Mister Potter. Class, does anyone have



an explanation for why some metals are more difficult to transfigure than are others?"

Various guesses were floated, including weight and density (from Hermione), but McGonnagall shot them all down. "I'll wager you can all manage a bronze or silver transfiguration, correct?" she asked the class at large. She got a majority of yes's, and nodded in approval.

"Tell me, Mister Potter, have you ever personally handled an object made of solid gold or platinum?"

"No, ma'am."

"There's part of your answer, then. Without personal experience of the target substance and form, you don't have sufficiently detailed knowledge of the desired substance to properly visualize the result." A little light bulb went on in Harry's brain. He visualized the chrome-plated second-place bowling statue of Vernon's that he'd cleaned so many times: the shine of the metal, the weight of the statue, the feeling in his fingers. Then he transfigured the stick once more into a series of circular hoops rendered in chrome.

"There," McGonnagall said with a nod. "Well done. Try wrought iron, next, Mister Potter." Harry did so, and was able to produce a series of wrought iron loops with a bit of effort. He could feel his magical reserves draining with the frequent spell casting, and decided that was enough for the moment. He swapped pen for wand and began another page of two-columned notes. Eventually McGonnagall stopped the spell casting portion of the class and switched to lecturing about their next topic. Harry carefully and casually lowered the tip of his wand to the floor, screened by his leg from obvious view. He drew power slowly from the floor as the spruce-and-phoenix wand hummed in the back of his mind. It was interesting to see the golden radiance of the stones fade to grey in a widening circle around him as he drew the power off, and watch it ebb back once he stopped.

The intro to Ancient Runes class was mildly interesting, but being immersed almost entirely in theory was not as much to Harry's liking as was the practical application of that knowledge. He decided then to seek out Stephen Cornfoot and negotiate a little tutoring. At the ten o'clock break, Hermione, Lisa and Harry retired to the study club

room to discuss Team Granger's progress and next steps. Finding the diadem was their mission, now, Hermione declared.

"What about the stone?" Lisa asked.

"What about it?" Hermione replied. "It's here. It's well guarded, according to Hagrid. The headmaster knows what he's about, surely. Why should we stick our noses into it?"

"We shouldn't," Harry said.

"Fine by me," Lisa replied. Hermione nodded.

"So, the diadem..." Hermione went on. "It was supposedly stolen by Rowena's daughter, Helena, who ran off with it. Her ghost reappeared years later, as the Grey Lady."

"And no one knows any more?" Harry asked.

"We aren't certain of that. We haven't done any serious research on Helena yet."

"So let me see if I have this straight," Lisa said. "According to legend, she had the diadem, and then lost it somewhere. Centuries later, she tells you," she said, looking to Hermione, "...to seek it out, and you would find it."

"Seems like she would be the obvious place to start," Harry said.

"But she's not telling any more than she already has," Hermione supplied.

"Think—did anything she said to you indicate that she knew where it was?" he asked.

"...No," Hermione said after a moment. "Only that I should seek it."

"It's still a puzzle, then," Lisa said.

"More research?" Harry asked.

"I don't know how much might be written about her," Hermione speculated. The other two frowned.

"We'll ask the other ghosts, then; they've known her for centuries; maybe they know her story," Lisa suggested.

Harry twigged to her train of thought, and said "Perhaps ask the portraits, as well. Some of them have also been here for centuries, listening and watching. They may know a thing or two."

"Pity Rowena doesn't have portrait here," Hermione said. "I'd have loved to talk to her."

"...That we know of," Harry amended.

"True."

"You said before that you believed that whatever treasure she directed you to find, it was already here in the castle. Is that still the case?"

"I'm not so sure anymore," Hermione conceded.

"Well...we can't very well search outside the castle until summer at the earliest," Lisa put in dryly. "Might as well look around here for the next seven months; we might get lucky."

"You think?" Hermione asked.

"Why not?" Lisa replied. They both looked at Harry.

"It's something we can do, given our constraints. Let's pursue the avenues we do have: more research on the trail of the diadem and a systematic search of the castle. It will probably take seven months to properly search this place, anyway," Harry said.

"True," Hermione replied. "We're agreed, then, on that course of action? We search, and we research?"

"The minions agree," Harry said with a lopsided smile.

"Lovely," Hermione said with an amused tone of voice and a little clapping of hands.

"So, next topic. We're officially starting the study club at four o'clock today, then?" Harry said.

"I'll be here, I've got an essay to finish for Herbology," Lisa said.

"I'll be here, too," Hermione confirmed.

"I'll see if I can't rope one or two my roommates into joining us," Harry offered.

"What about Tracey and Daphne?" Hermione asked.

"I expect they'll be here," Harry confirmed. "I'll speak to Professor Flitwick about getting an unused potions table brought in here, and a cabinet for the more common ingredients."

"Good luck funding that," Lisa responded.

"Oh, I have my ways," Harry said with a grin. "If we're done here, I want to catch up with Neville before Arithmancy."

"Enjoy," Hermione said with a little wave.

"Toodles," Lisa rejoined.

Harry eventually found Neville on a stairwell coming from Gryffindor tower, along with Lee Jordan and all three Weasleys. Did they always travel in packs, Harry wondered?

"Say Neville, how was potions class this morning?" Harry said with a grin. The shy boy's eyes grew wide and his whole face lit up.

"You heard? Harry it was brilliant! The look on Snape's face when he found his lab wall to wall with Bertie Botts' Beans, with all of us waiting outside... it was bloody brilliant, really," Neville said, wiping a tear of mirth from his eye. "Oh, man...what a day. He was a right terror for the rest of the class, though. So consider yourself warned, yeah?"

"Right. Thanks for that...so he was dumbfounded, eh?" Harry said with relish. Fred and George, who had already heard the tale, took notice.

George said, "Oy, Harry...you wouldn't know anything about how hundreds of pounds of candy came to be found in the locked, warded Potions classroom, would you? Because—"

"—we'd really like to know how that was possible!" Fred finished with a grin.

"Ask me no questions, and I'll tell you no lies," Harry said with a matching grin. Both twins' eyes went wide, and their stereophonic laughter echoed down the hall.

"I knew it! Bloody brilliant!" Fred proclaimed. Ron just shook Harry's hand and thanked him for 'thoroughly discombobulating the greasy git'. Harry gathered Snape didn't like the Gryffindors very much, and anything that discomfited was welcome. With a parting wave, George said, "Come see us at dinner, yeah? I've got something for you." Harry nodded.

Arithmancy was just not Harry's cup of tea; the formulas bent all the rules of math as he knew them. Apparently there was an intuitive element here that came from some gene he didn't possess. He could grind through it, and did, but it never came easily. There would always be some unmentioned variable or process that the book inevitably explained after you'd completed the assignment. Harry decided reading three chapters ahead from now on was a good defensive measure; that, and tutoring; lots of tutoring.

Lunch was routine, apart from most of the table asking 'Still alive there, Hammond?' and the wild talk about the Potions room being 'full to the ceiling' with 'candies of all kinds', and Professor Snape being furious. Harry just kept quiet and grinned through the stories. Steve and Wanda arrived a bit late, and Harry noticed something different right away; the red ribbon 'leash' that the boy had been using was gone, and in place was a little magical cord running from him to the conjured fish. Harry blinked at that for a second. He really wanted to know what that was—he had a use for a spell like that. But, he couldn't very well ask about what he sensed without opening a large can of worms. So he thought about it for a blink, and said instead, "Hullo, Steve. Hullo, Wanda." The balloon-fish did a little barrel-role, as per usual. Kelly grinned. "Say, no ribbon today? Aren't you afraid she'll wander off?"

"Nah. We kept getting tangled up, so I switched to the Toddler Tether."

"Oh, I hated that when I was little!" Kelly said.

"Same here!" Clarkson offered.

Head tilted in confusion, Harry asked, "What's the Toddler Tether, exactly?"

Steven gestured for Kelly to explain. She said, "It's a minder spell, like a magical string. Busy mums use it to keep their toddlers from wandering too far away. That's a brilliant use for it, by the way, Steven; nicely done."

"Huh," Harry said. "I learn something new every day."

"I should hope so, mate; you're at school," Hammond rejoined. Groans made the rounds of their end of the Raven table.

"Would you mind showing me that spell, later?" Harry asked. "I've got a different use in mind for it." Steven readily agreed, and they were all distracted shortly thereafter by Hammond noisily spewing pumpkin juice from his nose. Apparently someone had put a live miniature frog in his glass. All the first years promptly learned that Hammond loathed frogs, causing a sort of gleam to appear in Clarkson's eye.

From one to two the first-year Ravens had their 'supplementary' DADA review with Anthony Goldstein. He actually summarized the lesson in clear, concise language, working from the premise that everyone in Raven house had indeed read and largely understood what was in the book. He spent a good forty minutes demonstrating the spells and having them practice, which Harry rather enjoyed. Anthony was not particularly athletic or graceful, but he was meticulous and powerful, a potent combination. All too soon, their best hour of the day came to an end, and the young Ravens shuffled resignedly to another double Potions class. Harry was feeling semi-prepared, having read the approved and unapproved texts through twice over; but one never knew, with Snape.

They found the Potions classroom looking mostly normal except for the occasional Bertie Botts' lingering by a table-leg or cabinet base.

Every time he saw one, Harry smiled. Snape must have been preoccupied, because he only gave Harry two ridiculously hard questions that day, both of which Harry answered. Snape watched him like a hawk the entire time. They got through the inquisition/lecture and the subsequent brewing exercise without major mishap, although to Harry it felt a bit like a protracted tightrope walk. Snape loomed over his shoulder twice, but made no comment or gesture. His aura made Harry sincerely uncomfortable, though. 'What was that man thinking?' Harry wondered.

'What was going through that boy's mind?' Severus wondered. He'd obviously been reading Slughorn's old text; that much Severus had deduced. He recognized the phrasing on both of the answers the boy had given today, in response to questions selected for that purpose. Why would he have read that in addition to the three approved texts? Was he really that studious? Severus considered the boy from across the room. The child had many of Lily's mannerisms, probably unconsciously; the way his head tilted at some unknown thing, just as hers used to do, and the voluminous note-taking. He was meticulous with his ingredient preparation, as she used to be; not at all like that insufferable ponce Potter. Severus was beginning to believe that if he regarded the boy as 'Lily's son', then the child might not put him on edge so, and perhaps they would both survive the year. Not that he'd ever show it; that was not how a Slytherin behaved.

Finally, at four minutes after four, Harry stepped into room six for the inaugural meeting of the study club. Lisa had beaten him there, somehow, and had the door open with a little hand-written sign on it that said "First Years Study Club". Harry called for Tiggy, and requested from her a tea service, plates of cookies and a carafe of coffee. Tiggy was, as always, pleased to help. Hermione joined them next, and assisted in the posting of charmed subject signs in each corner of the room above the desks circled there. Some were doubled up, as with Potions and Herbology. Steven and Hammond wandered just as the food arrived, and Lisa got Steven to agree to lead the Astrology review. Hammond jumped at the chance to work on that, and the two promptly took over the couch and got started.

Neville wandered in a few minutes later, looking shy and a bit lost. Harry waved him in, handed him a cuppa, introduced him around properly, and then the pair took over the Potions/Herbology corner. Harry quickly got the feeling that they could both learn from one

another in this arrangement. At around quarter-past four, Tracey and Daphne stepped in, looking wary. Harry glanced up at their arrival, and smiled broadly. The corner of Daphne's mouth turned up in response. Tracey gave him a nod. Lisa stepped over to welcome them, officially, and fill them in on the organization of the room. Tracey joined Hermione for some Runes work, while Daphne collected a cup & saucer and glided over to join them in the Potions/Herbology corner.

Harry introduced his two friends, the shy Gryffindor and the sly Slytherin. Once they got Neville started on the topic of plants, his true aptitude and intelligence became obvious. He led them through the lessons to date with remarkable efficiency, and Daphne's skepticism eventually evaporated. Harry did a similar review for their last three potions lessons, and answered numerous questions as he went. By the time the six o'clock bell chimed, it was self-evident to all those involved why this was a good idea: one could learn from one's peers without a teacher hanging over them, as some did, and it was perfectly fine to ask as many questions as one wanted or needed. Neville looked particularly pleased to understand how some kinds of plant preparations impacted the resulting potion; Daphne looked relieved and more confident with the potions assignment assigned for Wednesday. Even Harry got a leg-up on his Herbology essay, which needed clarification added in two places based on Neville's tutelage. At twenty-past six, Tracey and Hermione began packing up. Harry and group took the queue to begin doing the same.

"Harry, mate, this was excellent. I've learned more about potions in two hours here than I have in ten hours of class!" Neville said.

"Agreed, Harry. This has been very helpful," Daphne said with half a smile.

"I'm glad," he replied, looking at each of them in turn. "I learned a thing or two from you as well, Neville; don't sell yourself short," Harry said with a pat on the boy's shoulder. "And don't let Snape rattle you."

"He has a thing against Gryffindors," Daphne said. "From his student days here, I believe." Harry nodded; that confirmed his earlier suspicion, then. Neville chose that moment to say his goodbyes and thank-you's, with a promise to show up after dinner.



"I don't suppose you are tutoring again tomorrow?" Daphne said. "I mean, you must need time to do your own work, not just tutor us."

"I'll be here; I need to get some help with Arithmancy from Padma," Harry offered. "That stuff boggles me."

"Me too, somewhat," Daphne said with a genuine smile that Harry found made it hard to concentrate. "See you after dinner?" she asked.

"Er...sure," Harry replied. "I'll be here, eight until ten. We're doing..." he paused to look around at the charmed signs, "...more transfiguration, COMC, Astronomy, and...DADA, that's me, apparently."

"I'll need that," she said. "I can't learn a thing in that man's classes."

"Same here," Harry confided. "We have a seventh-year teaching us the lessons for real." Daphne's brows rose at that news. "Flitwick arranged it. At least now, I can lead people through a review of what we are supposed to have learned. I don't know all that much about useful magical defense, though. Come to think of it, you may know more than I do."

"I...hmm. Well...I do know five or eight useful spells, " Daphne said, and drew her lips between her teeth in a considering gesture.

"Would you mind showing us what you know?" Harry asked whilst bumping his eyebrows and giving her his puppy-dog look. She snorted at his expression, and then her own expression warmed in a way Harry thought he'd like to see more of, circumstances permitting.

"Alright, alright," she said with humor. "I'll show everyone a spell or two. If you want a proper lesson, though, ask your two pranksters, or Tracey. Her older brothers have taught her well."

"Brothers?"

"Already graduated, both of them. Twenty and eighteen, respectively."

"Ah. I'll ask Richie and Tracey, then," Harry said, noticing Daphne's eyes cut over his shoulder.

"Ask me what?" Tracey Davis' voice came from behind him. She was coming over to collect Daphne, apparently. Hermione was with her, looking pleased. Harry shifted to include them in his line of sight.

"We were just discussing a DADA tutorial," Harry said. "I can review all the class material so everyone understands it, no problem." Tracey nodded. "But," he added, holding up a finger, "...we need a bit of practical learning too. I want to work on some good, basic magical self defense drills, all of us, so if certain others attempt to pick on any of us," he said with a pointed look at each of them, "they will learn how much of an error in judgment that would be."

"Commendable," Tracey said in her no-nonsense way. "But what does that have to do with me?"

"Daphne indicated you might have a few spells that you might consent to share with your fellow study clubbers," Harry said. Her expression grew thoughtful, and she looked at Daphne. Daphne leaned over and whispered something in her ear, causing Tracey to pull away and glance at her confusedly. Daphne gave her a brow-lifted stare, and after a long beat, Tracey huffed once in concession.

"Alright, I show you all a spell or three," she said in a light-hearted, much-put-upon tone. "Since you're helping us out, and all that."

"Excellent!" Harry said, while Hermione proclaimed "Yes!" at the same time. Daphne just smiled lightly at her fellow Slytherin.

"When?" Tracey asked.

"How about here, tomorrow?" Harry replied. "I'll do the class review tonight, and you can do the practical tomorrow. That will give us a chance to spread the word a bit, too. Only to the first-year Ravens and Neville, though. I'll vouch for him."

After a moment Tracey nodded her assent. "Back here after dinner, then?"

"Yes. Bring Stephen, if he's interested," Harry said.

"I'll ask," Tracey replied. She tilted her head toward the door, and said, "Come on, Daph, back to the snake pit."

"Doesn't that sound charming," Hermione said with a shake of her head as the two girls hefted their belongings and made ready to go.

"And entirely accurate," Daphne replied. She glanced around the ceiling for a moment, and said, "I already like it much better here." Harry and Hermione traded a glance.

"See you later," Hermione said to their retreating forms. Daphne waved over her shoulder as they disappeared through the door.

The evening study club was well attended; all eight Ravens were present, plus four others—basically, everyone they'd invited so far. Harry did the study review for DADA as promised, and had six people around him for it, including Stephen Cornfoot, Neville, Tracey and Daphne. He casually stuck Hammond between the Slytherins and the lone Gryffindor, just in case. He covered the five short chapters that Quirrell ostensibly had, plus most of the supplementary analysis that Anthony had delivered. The non-Ravenclaws were scrambling to take notes. Apparently, he wasn't the only one who couldn't bear to listen to Quirrell in class. Harry even managed thirty minutes of Arithmancy help from a very fluent and pleased-to-show-it Padma Patil.

At a quarter to ten, Harry addressed the group at large, speaking from the same central position in front of the couch as they had used on Saturday. He thanked them all for their attendance, and thanked the circle leaders for their efforts. Then he announced the plan for the following night, namely, more hands-on spellwork, which was met with noises of approval from the group at large. Surprisingly, Tracey blushed at the attention, and Clarkson was clapped on the back for his volunteering efforts.

In an impromptu bit of insight, Harry said to the group, "Another item: This is your club as much as it is mine. I would like to see a show of hands on approving study club membership for Stephen Cornfoot." Harry gestured towards where Stephen was sitting next to Hermione and Steve at the Astronomy table. Hands went up, and Harry counted. "All against?" he asked. No hands went up. "So that's eight for, none against, four abstaining. Welcome, Stephen", Harry said with a smile.

"Once more, please; a vote on extending an invitation of membership to Ernie MacMillan of Hufflepuff." Harry counted once again. "That's nine for, none against, three abstaining. I'll speak to Ernie tomorrow."

"Last point: All in favor of a simple password on the door?" Harry counted again, and it also passed. "Very good. The password will be etir." He saw Neville scribbling, and amended, "If you must write that down, please do it backwards. I will arrange it with the deputy headmistress, and you will all be notified when it goes into effect. That's all. Thank you once again for coming. The room will be open tomorrow from 4:35 until 6:30, and from 8:00 until 10:00. I believe we help ourselves by helping each other. Enjoy your evenings, everybody."

Harry was walking back to the tower alongside Steve, Wanda and Hermione, when with a flare of radiance she asked, "Harry, etir isn't Latin; it isn't even a Latin-derived language, as far as I know. What language is it, exactly?"

Harry looked casually around them, including behind, before he said quietly, "It's Gobbledegook." Hermione looked puzzled, but Steven could have been knocked over with a feather.

"Are you telling me-" he began in an excited tone of voice, only to have Harry shush him. "Sorry," he began in a loud whisper. "Are you telling me you speak Gobbledegook? Really?"

"A bit, yeah," Harry said quietly.

"Sweet Merlin's underpants, Harry, do you know how rare that is? All the spells you could learn that no one else knew..."

"That occurred to me, yeah," Harry said with a ghost of a smile.

"So what's it mean? Etir?" Hermione asked. Harry mused that she was perhaps the most relentless person he knew.

With a broad grin and humor in his voice, Harry said, "door." Steven snorted, amused. Hermione however frowned.

"Wait, so our door password will be door ?" she asked, looking at Harry as if he were slow.

"Sure, why not? Could you have guessed it?"

"Touché," she replied. She sighed, shook her head, and muttered, 'door' with the tone of voice one uses when rolling one's eyes. Harry and Steven shared a look and a grin. Wanda did a double-barrel-roll overhead.

Upon entering their dorm room, Harry and Steven (and Wanda) found that all of Hammond's belongings, right down to his curtains and sheets, were now covered in printed and embroidered frogs. Even his slippers now had little macramé frog's heads on them. A big, green knitted 'trunk cozy' resembling the head of a huge Kermit the frog covered the trunk at the foot of his bed. The pillows were now round like Lilly pads. Nothing was untouched. Harry snorted, while Steven laughed out loud. Steven casually dismissed the tether spell, letting Wanda glide around the room. This prompted Harry to ask, "Hey, teach me that spell?"

"Sure," he replied. "The base incantation is ligamen, as in string, followed by whatever you want to tether to yourself. I use picis for Wanda. A parent would use parvulus for a toddler. The wand motion looks like this," he added, and proceeded to demonstrate. Harry practiced it a half-dozen times until Steven pronounced it passable, then he pointed his wand at Wanda and muttered 'ligamen picis'. Wanda stopped moving for a moment, and then circled back towards him. The little ribbon, a thread of silver magic in his vision, left his wand and spiraled up to the fish like a child holding a balloon. Steven showed him how to anchor the spell to his sleeve, so he could feel a little tug on that sleeve as Wanda swam to the length of her tether and found the end. The spell was a little bit elastic, he realized, so as not to pull the caster around too harshly. Very clever. Harry dismissed the spell to Wanda, and she scuttled off into the curtains around Steven's bed. He thanked Steven for the lesson, professed his tiredness, and said his good-nights.

Harry stepped into the loo and closed the door. His curiosity was boiling over: could this be made to work? He filled the sink with water, stepped back, pointed his wand at it, and muttered 'ligamen aqua'. A silver string left the wand and dove to and through the water. With his free hand, Harry touched the flexible silver strand, felling it hum gently against his fingers. He gently grasped the magical thread, and Pulled heat from it. The magic, having no mass

and no resistance, transferred that Pull perfectly to the water at the other end, which rapidly cooled and froze. Even as he broke out into a light sweat from the increased body temperature, the corners of Harry's mouth turned up in victory. That had been almost too easy. Harry ended the spell, and knocked on the frozen puddle in the sink. "Look at that," he said quietly. "Perfect energy transfer along a magical conduit...room-temperature superconductivity. All it took was a little magic. Heh." Harry put the borrowed heat back into the ice, rapidly liquefying it once more. Harry pulled the drain, let himself out, closed the door behind him, and then strolled over to his bed, all the while whistling 'I've Got the World on a String'. He dressed for bed, retrieved the little book George had handed him at dinner, and set about reading ostensibly dangerous things about runes.

At little after five in the morning, something faintly magical sailed across Harry's perception, like a flashlight seen through closed eyelids. It came back a second time, and it was close enough to cause Harry to crack open one eye in an attempt to ascertain the cause. A large, yellow-brown eye looked back at him from perhaps a hand-span away, giving Harry a brief moment of panic until it pulled back enough for him to recognize the intruder: Wanda hovered gently in front of him, swaying back and forth as her fins fanned the air. Harry huffed out a breath, assuming she was just visiting. She did a loop-the-loop and came back to station-keeping a half-meter in front of him. "H'llo, Wanda," Harry whispered sleepily. "Everything alright?" To his surprise, the little conjured fish wobbled slowly left and right in a piscine imitation of a shake of the head. Harry's sleepy brain processed that for a second, then he rolled over onto his back and looked her properly with both eyes. "No?" he asked quietly. Again, the wobbly negative.

Harry slipped his glasses on, and took a good look around. "Is it Steven?" he whispered; wobbly no. "One of the other boys?" ; wobbly no. "Any of the girls, then?" he asked, wondering how Wanda might even know that. She wobbled another negative. "An intruder?" Wobbly no once again. She sort of bounced up and down in place a few times, in what Harry interpreted as frustration. He looked closer at her, and saw something...odd. Visually, she was translucent. Magically, she looked a little faint as well. On a hunch, Harry asked, "Is it you?" This time, a wobbly dip that sufficed for yes. "Ah," he said, and some part of him idly noticed the influence of his mentor's speech patterns.

Harry sat up and dropped his feet into his slippers, which fortunately did not look like frogs. He donned his dressing gown, beckoned Wanda to follow with a gesture, and made his way downstairs to the deserted common room. The hearth still had a good collection of embers in it, so he tossed a few twigs in, then a larger sticks. They caught easily, and soon an ambitious little fire was going in the hearth, sending a bit more light and heat into the room. Wanda hovered close by, watching him as he fiddled. When he stood up, she was nearly eye to eye once again, making him blink rapidly. "Alright, let's have a look at you," Harry said, taking a seat on the end of the couch facing the fire. He patted his lap as if summoning a dog, and the conjured fish swam over in front of him. Harry reduced the suppression on his magical sight, which he kept in place out of habit now to avoid the intense glare and resulting eyestrain. The whole room brightened markedly, but Harry focused his perceptions on their adopted mascot. The magical construct making up the conjuration was fraying at edges, breaking down. Harry could see magical threads and strands hanging loose from the main mesh of magic that defined the shape and form of the spell. The dimmed intensity of the mesh worried him as well; the spell was indeed failing. How Wanda had become sufficiently self-aware as to perceive this was an open question in Harry's mind; did all magic do that, given enough time? Or only certain spells? How did that work, exactly? Without knowing the spell used to conjure her, Harry decided plan B was his best option, namely: solidify the spell once again with additional magic. Or, feed the fish.

He slowly lifted his right palm, and asked his own blue magic to swirl up into a little cloud. It did, forming a familiar spiraling column of glowing blue motes in his palm. He nearly smirked as Wanda's little eyes got wider, and she bounced up and down in place. "Go on, it's alright," he told her quietly. Not needing to be told twice, she glided through the little blue spiral, attacking the motes like a fish would fish-food. She was amusing to watch, and Harry chuckled at her as she flipped and dove after the little motes of magic. After a minute or so, she figured out she could simply hover over Harry's palm and passively absorb the effervescent magic. Harry watched the mesh of her construct brighten and solidify once more. The frayed and broken threads melted back into the renewed cords of the spell. She even looked happier, Harry mused. When she seemed properly solid once more, he closed his palm, ending the spell. "Better?" he said. Wanda dipped her chin again, and then performed a little barrel-roll, twice around, which Harry assumed was meant in

gratitude. "You're welcome," he said, standing. "Just keep an eye on Steven and the lads for me, alright?" he said, looking at her as he moved to place more wood on the fire. She dipped her little chin at him again, hovering now at eye-level. Harry dropped two logs on the fire and turned back to find her still there, alternating between facing him and facing the stairs. 'Definitely getting smarter, then,' he mused. "You go ahead, I'm going to stay down here for a bit. Go find Steven," he said. She bobbed in place once, then hover-swam in a smooth arc back up the steps. Harry presumed she could go right through the door, and she probably knew it.

Harry sat back down on the couch, and considered the last ten minutes of his life. "Magic is odd," he said aloud. And useful, his brain rejoined. Unique skills are not mastered lightly. Where had he heard that before, Harry wondered? Above one palm he willed into being one of the small bubble charms Flitwick had shown him. While it sat on his palm, he felt a connection to his magic making up the sphere, and he could control it easily; when asked, it would change size, color and contents. As soon as he hovered it, though, the connection was gone, and he had to cast a new spell on it to affect it, as with any other discrete object. Unless... Harry cast the Toddler Tether between his left hand and the sphere floating over his right. His magic recognized its own essence when the filament spell met the sphere, and the connection popped back into existence in his sense perception. He asked the floating sphere to grow, and it did, with only a scosche more effort than had been required when it sat on his palm. 'So the tether can conduct will and magic, as well as energy', Harry surmised. He shrunk the bubble to the size of a golf ball, so the magical drain was minimal, and shortened the tether to a foot over his palm. "This is bloody cool," he thought. He conjured a quarter-cupful of water inside the sphere with a brief aquamenti, and Pulled the heat from it, freezing it solid within a few seconds. 'Combine that with a banishing spell, and you've got a nasty little present,' he mused, thinking for the first time in days of Dudley and Piers, and their penchant for tossing ice-filled snowballs. 'They wouldn't be expecting it in July, either...' the vengeful part of his brain said. The smarter part countered that there was no reason to go looking for trouble.

He moved the tether to his other palm as Steven had shown him, and lifted his free hand back towards the fire. He began borrowing heat from the air between him and the hearth. He shoved that heat into the sphere floating over his palm, watching it rapidly melt the ice.



The magic got a bit more...chaotic as it conducted the heat, like little static discharges in Harry's vision. In another fifteen seconds he had the water at a simmer, then at a boil. Steam soon roiled in the small bubble, and he felt the drain of maintaining the bubble spell grow and the pressure within rose. Pressure...something about pressure, he remembered from his readings in the Greater Whinging Library. He mentally scolded himself for starting to forget his proper science already. 'Too busy reading about magical plants and Viking runes', his brain chided him. He needed to get some proper science books into his growing personal library, Harry decided. Surely those could be ordered by mail. Harry banished the sphere of superheated steam into the back of the firebox behind the flames, where it exploded with a tiny bang and a hiss. 'Harmless little bubble spells,' he thought. 'Heh.' He created another one the size of a pea, visualizing thick magical walls on the bubble, and caught it up between his fingers. He squeezed with all his might, but he could not physically crush it. Curious, he dropped it to the floor, and stood in it. It bore all his weight without complaint, although he could feel the magical drain increase substantially as he did so. 'Strong, too, if needs be,' Harry mused. 'And invisible to most people. Interesting....'

The sound of footsteps on the balcony above distracted Harry from his thoughts. He Pulled the magic out of the sphere and the tether, collapsing both near-instantly; not that anyone else was likely to see them, but better safe than sorry. Harry watched most of the current Ravenclaw quidditch team emerge from the stairwell, dressed in exercise clothes for a pre-dawn run. They mostly ignored him as they shuffled sleepily by, though Roger Davies gave him a polite nod. Harry decided it was time to wander back upstairs, recharge his magical reserves, and start his day. He had things to do.

## CH21: Intermittent Progress

Seeing as he was up anyway, Harry made himself ready for the day a bit earlier than usual, and wandered down to the great hall just after 7:00. Some of the older students were at their tables, as were some of the faculty. Dumbledore was however not currently present, which filled Harry with sufficient courage to detour from his normal route and approach the head table. From the second chair, McGonagall noticed him once he'd come fairly close, paused in her conversation with Pomona Sprout, and greeted him in her memorable burr.

"Good Morning, Mister Potter. To what do we owe the pleasure?"

"Good Morning, Professors. I apologize for disturbing your breakfast. Would you have a moment to discuss a security arrangement, Deputy Headmistress?"

The women traded looks. Sprout's eyes were smiling merrily at her long-time friend. She nodded to Minerva, who said, "Very well, Mister Potter. No apologies necessary. Come with me, please." She rose and led him into a small alcove off the rear of the great hall. Harry pleaded his case for the password on the study club door, a potions table, and an ingredients cabinet. She stared at him for a long moment with a measuring gaze. Harry volunteered that the password request was a result of the entire group voting, and he suggested she talk to Neville about his impressions of their activities so far.

After some consideration, McGonagall said, "The password can be arranged; I'll see to it this afternoon. The potions equipment won't be a problem, nor the supply cabinet, but you'll need to stock it yourselves; there is nothing in the budget for stocking another lab."

"I understand, ma'am. Thank you for your assistance. You are welcome to stop by any time and observe, of course. A cat would probably be fairly inconspicuous," Harry added.

"Indeed," she said dryly, with a tiny smile. "Have you any particular password in mind, or shall I select one?"

"Yes, ma'am. We'd like the password to be Etir."

Her eyebrow rose once again. "Very well. Be advised, all the faculty and the prefects will have the password, so they may access the room in the event of an emergency."

"Understood, ma'am. If we had an incident," -Minerva's brows contracted, "...an injury, let's say, while reviewing our defense spells, is there a magical means to summon help? I mean, other than an elf?"

Minerva's eyebrows rose high on her forehead once again; they did seem to get quite the workout when speaking with this young man. "Not at present," she said. "Although that's not a bad idea, Mister Potter. Perhaps a portrait," Harry wrinkled his nose and shook his head, "...or a charmed object might fit the bill. I shall speak to Filius about it. In the meantime, call for an elf and have them fetch a staff member in an emergency. And five points to Ravenclaw for planning ahead."

"Thank you, ma'am," Harry said with his politest smile.

"If that's all?" McGonagall asked.

"Yes, professor."

"Let us return to our breakfast, then," she said with a gesture, and led Harry out into the great hall once more. He proceeded down to the far end of the Ravenclaw table where the firsties sat, and found there one very sleepy Lisa Turpin with a carafe of coffee parked directly in front of her. Kelly sat beside her, nose in a book Harry recognized as *The Princess Bride*. He sat down across from Kelly, who lowered her book to greet him. Lisa had a pre-coffee glassy-eyed stare fixed firmly in place, and merely offered a wave. Harry found this very amusing. He whispered a 'psst' to Kelly, who had just lifted her book once again. As her eyes appeared over the top of the book, Harry tilted his head in Lisa's direction and said, "It just so happens that your friend here is only MOSTLY dead!" Kelly's eyes darted to the zombie-like Lisa, then went wide over the spine of the book, and her brows arched comically high. She hid an obvious grin behind the book, but her eyes smiled at Harry and her frame shook with silent chuckles. Harry sipped his coffee and grinned back at her.

"Hey!" Lisa finally objected. "M' not dead! Just been up too late with essays and..and...work! Need my coffee, thas' all," she said through a yawn.

"Right. 'Course," Harry said with a nod. He scooped himself some eggs, then with a little sense of déjà vu, scooped some onto Lisa's plate as well. He handed her a fork, dumped two triangles of toast on her plate, and stuck a fork into her empty left hand. "You should eat, too," he said.

Lisa looked down. "Huh? Oh...oh, right. Yeah. Okay. Thanks," she said, and proceeded to switch hands with the fork and start mechanically shoveling the food down. Kelly had observed this little interaction with interest; apparently Harry wasn't terribly shy about taking care of his friends. He was perceptive enough to know what to do, and forthright enough to do it. She looked back to him across the table, and considered how perplexing he sometimes was. He swallowed, and gestured to Lisa with his fork.

"What's up with her, really?" he whispered.

Kelly rolled her eyes. "Romance novels - muggle ones. She's addicted," Kelly said. Harry's own brows climbed.

"Really?" he mouthed. Kelly nodded back. That seemed so completely at odds with his impression of Lisa. 'Girls,' thought Harry; possibly for the first time, and definitely for not the last time. He shook his head, and sipped his over-sugared black coffee. Hermione and Steven joined them soon after, followed by the rest of the first year cohort. Harry took the opportunity to inform them of the imminent password change on the study club door.

Mail delivery was punctuated by Hedwig's appearance with the anticipated reply from Gringotts. Harry stashed the scroll in the inner pocket of his robes for later, and happily fed his owl apple slices as she sat on his shoulder, attracting the occasional admiring glance from their end of the hall. "Come see me later, alright?" he asked her. "I'll have another letter for you this afternoon. Go sleep for awhile, beautiful," he told her with a stroke of his thumb against her plumage. She clicked softly to him, then opened her wings behind his head and leapt powerfully into the air with a brilliant flash of white and an ultra-soft whoosh of wings. Kelly Bloom took particular notice that morning of the affection in his voice when he talked to his owl.

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Herbology was uneventful, as the Slytherin trio largely behaved themselves by virtue of the fact that Sprout had split them up into two pairs, as Vector had. Apparently that idea had spread amongst the faculty, which pleased Harry to no end. Draco shot him one long, unreadable glance as they were packing up. Harry nodded politely back, which earned him a smirk. Harry wandered outside to the birch tree where Daphne had last waited for him, thinking that the girls would perhaps walk this way again. He was not disappointed. He was, however, completely outnumbered as Hermione, Daphne and Tracey came up the path together. They approached the silver birch and the boy leaning on it.

"Hello, Potter; fancy meeting you here," Tracey said in her humorously gruff tone.

"Ladies," Harry said. "May I walk with you?" He ended up walking beside Tracey, with the other two behind.

"So, the password will be working on the study club door this afternoon. Please let Stephen know if you see him."

"I will do," Tracey said.

"Harry, tell them what Etir means," Hermione said with a sing-song voice from the behind him.

"It's gobbledegook for 'door', " Harry said.

"Wait, so our door password, is 'door'?" Tracey asked.

"I know, right? He's a bit mental! " Hermione said from the behind him.

"Hey!" Harry said, looking over his shoulder with a grin at the two smiling girls behind. "Pipe down in the peanut gallery!"

When he turned back, Daphne leaned towards Hermione and asked quietly, "What's a peanut gallery?" Hermione grinned again, then explained.

"No one but Flitwick, myself, and possibly Dumbledore would know the word, alright?" Harry said. "There are no published books on Gobbledegook. Security through obscurity." Tracey thought a moment, then nodded in acceptance. Behind him, Daphne rolled her eyes, and Hermione snorted at his logic.

The four of them walked slowly, chatting as they did so, and the rest of the break rapidly passed in conversation.

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Harry arrived a bit early to Charms class, and was pleased to find the door open. He entered, and immediately ducked a large flying book in the process of returning to its shelf. "Oy!" he exclaimed.

"Apologies, Harry, I didn't see you there," his professor's voice came from the far end of the room. All the hovering books, which had frozen in place at his shout, resumed their homeward flights.

"No problem. How are you today, sir?" Harry said to the room at large. Where was his professor, anyway?

"Well enough, thank you; and yourself?"

"Good, thanks. The study club has its third meeting this afternoon."

"Yes, Mister Hammond told me a bit about yesterday's sessions. They seem to have been well received."

"So far so good, sir. I was wondering if I could move our review meeting to 5pm today, so that I might prepare to lead study review tonight."

His professor was silent for a moment, then actually appeared as he weaved through stacks of books taller than he was. "I don't see why not. What topic are you reviewing this evening?"

"Defense, sir."

"Ah. Very well, then. You paid attention in Anthony's tutoring sessions I trust?"

"Very much so, yes sir." Flitwick paused to look at him. "How is your control progressing on the drills I gave you?"

"I'm getting the hang of it. The small spells are challenging when you combine four or five charms together, but it's coming along. I think of it as create, command, and control. I'm working on all three, sir. Focusing on several things at once is getting easier. "

"Ah. Very good. We'll review that this afternoon, then. Here, catch!"

With that, Flitwick gently banished a hovering stack of four books towards Harry. His eyes went wide, and his wand came up with a hover charm incantation on his lips. Two of the books paused in mid-air; the third and forth sailed on undeterred. Harry sent a twist of will through the wand and a third beam of blue-white magic lashed out and caught the third book a half-meter from the floor. The forth book crashed unceremoniously to the floor a few meters to his left.

"Three out of four; not bad for a first attempt," Flitwick said. "You have been practicing."

"Yes, sir," Harry said, and with a further effort of will, extended a forth tendril of magic towards the book on the floor. He lifted it as well, and drew them into a tight formation. "....Where shall I stack these?"

"Third shelf, at the top, please." Harry nodded and hovered them over, unaware of his mentor's approving expression, or that the level of skill he was exhibiting was more typical of a third year, at least. With a bit of concentration he got the four tendrils to slide the books into place one at a time into the designated places as the first of his classmates arrived. Flitwick had turned away with a grin, calling back a 'Thank you, Harry' over his shoulder.

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At lunch later that day, everyone admired the spell work on Hammond's animated frog lapel pin, which hopped around the front of his robes, dodging his fingers if he tried to remove it. Wanda still looked normal, for which Harry was relieved. He told Steven in general what he'd done to reinforce the spells making up her magical construct, and his friend gratefully agreed to work out how he could feed her himself going forwards. As the lunch hour wound

down, Harry sought out Ernie and extended the invitation to the study club. Ernie seemed interested in being able to review with his peers, but he was not so convinced about the 'mixed attendance', as he put it. Harry personally vouched for the behavior of all those in the club, and suggested he try it out for a day or two and see how it went. Ernie provisionally agreed to that, for which Harry was pleased.

Defense class was was thankfully uneventful, and even marginally interesting as Quirrell touched on some of the creatures to be found in the black lake. The slytherin trio were their typical obnoxious selves, but had chosen the far back corner for their seats this time and as such their frequent whispers and laughter were more easily ignored. Interestingly, the other three slytherins sat at the very front, next to the Ravens.

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That evening a bit after eleven, Harry sat on the fifth floor balcony, at 'the map desk' as he'd come to think of it. Hedwig sat on the back of the chair over his right shoulder, watching her boy write as he so often did these days. Flashes of his day had invaded her dreams throughout the day; him walking down the stone hallways, him seated at a desk watching the lady-who-was-a-bear; the very short man waving a stick and talking. All the light and noise that came through his eyes and ears in the big stone castle. She preferred the quiet of the forest, the still night air and starlight; but he was here, so she would be also. Having these flashes of his day reassured her he was close, and unharmed. His presence loomed large now in her senses, sitting this close. The hum of his magical energies purred in the back of her mind, the whirr of his thoughts like a faraway voice on the wind. What Hedwig could not perceive directly were the ways in which their two magical fields were interweaving, adjusting gently like musical instruments harmonizing with one another. Her silvery aura had spirals of Harry's blue winding through it, even as two ghostly silver wings embraced him from behind, draping her aura over his. Harry felt her calming presence around him, familiar and comforting, like what he supposed normal people meant when they spoke of 'home'. He was certain the familiar bond was developing, and honestly it pleased him.

The journal page in Harry's slanted hand read:

"Tuesday 10 September -



- Sent off letters to Dufftown librarian today via muggle post. - Reply expected in perhaps four days? Need chamber of commerce information, business directory, phone book for trip planning.
- G. says the Potter wills are on file both at Gringott's and with the Ministry. Still working on a magical tutor willing to teach humans.
- Need portkey for visit in two weeks' time
- Need a sample of tr. gold for G. to assay
- Need science books - textbooks maybe? 2nd form?
- Need a book on familiar bonds....library doesn't have much. Maybe Grubbly-plank, or Hagrid? Or Eyelops' Owlery perhaps?
- Need a clever way to safely store runes - miniaturized, perhaps-metal is best.
- Magical isolators - for the runes, for the bed - something to shut off the noise and light. Medical source?
- Occlumency exercises ongoing. Clearing the mind is getting easier. Memory improved for topics reviewed in this state. Efficient.
- Quirrell/parasite....informed F. Wait and see for now.
- Dumbledore..."

Harry re-read the list, then stared at his final ellipsis for a long while. He had no measure of the man, beyond his reputation and his immensely intimidating personal presence. At first glance, Dumbledore's stewardship of funds from Harry's own school vault appeared to be without issue. Something told Harry there was more to their history, though, and he was keen on finding out what.

He shut the journal, whispering it locked with the password spell lifted from the Potter Grimoire. Absently, he stroked Hedwig's plumage with the back of a finger as he put the journal aside and unwound the leather thong binding Flitwick's tome on Gobbledegook. A slender silver spine did duty as a bookmark between two pages outlining Goblin clan politics. Harry twirled it absently between his

fingers as he read, the slender, pointed shape dancing across his knuckles. With a wash of magic Harry touched the slender item and willed it to flow once again. He had flowed this piece so often that it took very little effort to change its shape any more, as if it were eager to change on command. It wrapped around his finger like a ring, and then proceeded to weave in and out of the fingers on his hand like a miniature silver snake, swirling around each finger in turn, bent by magic, magnetism, and will. It coiled to rest around his ring finger as Harry turned the page, reading on into the night.

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Wednesday morning came too early. Another Hedwig-flying experience had displaced his dreaming last night, fortunately without the feasting on rodents this time, though two heart-pounding dives after mice left him exhausted. So it was a somewhat sleep-deprived and drowsy Harry that wandered down the common room in search of his year-mates en route to breakfast. He shuffled up next to Wright, Clarkson, and an equally sleepy-looking Lisa Turpin, who yawned mightily enough set him off as well.

"What kept YOU up?" Hermione asked him. Kelly's eyes cut to his face as Harry covered another yawn.

"Hedwig," Harry answered. "The familiar bond is kicking in, and when I'm sleeping I get bits of flashes of what she's seeing and hearing."

"Really?" both Kelly and Hermione asked at once, as Clarkson brows rose in interest.

"Yep. Diving out the sky at top speed, snatching a mouse off the ground and eating warm it is a experience I could do with just the once, thanks."

Hermione pulled a schrunched face in response, while Kelly said simply, "Ick."

"Charming, Harry. So, who's ready for breakfast, then?" Lisa said with a smile, causing Harry to grin.

"Lead us to the coffee," he said.

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The highlight of transfiguration that day was not so much the class itself, but the little murmur of interest Ernie generated when he set out a leather-bound book for notes, a rather prominent gold and onyx fountain pen, and a bottle of ink. He was clearly enjoying the attention, too. His pages were neater even than Harry's, owing to his excellent penmanship. Brilliant blue-black ink filled the pages of his new notebook in a precise, compact hand.

Even McGonagall noticed. "Impressive note-taking, Mister MacMillan. Can I expect the same quality on your essays?"

"Yes, Ma'am," Ernie said, waving the pen subtly.

"Very good." Her eyes cut to Harry's desk, where similar implements were in use. "Mister Potter, please stay after."

Harry's brows rose slightly, but he nodded and replied, "Yes, ma'am."

McGonagall completed the lesson for the day, continuing on with basic multi-part inanimate transfigurations. Harry approached her desk after class. His eyes tracked the playful stalking of the cat-aura around the seemingly still and proper woman.

"You wanted to see me, ma'am?"

"Mister Potter, yes. I wanted to inform you that the password has been set on the door you requested. Do NOT abuse the privilege or it will be revoked. Is that clear?"

"Yes, ma'am. Thank you."

"Take this as well. Affix it to a wall in the classroom." She handed him a brass plaque of sorts with the word 'EMERGENCY' engraved upon it, and large red button below it. "Press the button to speak to Madam Pomfrey and myself at any time. I need not remind you that abusing that privilege will NOT be tolerated."

"No, ma'am. On behalf of the study club, thank you for this as well. Was there anything else?"

Minerva considered him. "Would you.... Filius was very amused by your choice of password. It's Goblin-speak, I presume?"

"Yes, ma'am."

McGonnagall looked at him for a long beat, waiting for further explanation. When none was forthcoming, she huffed lightly, and said, " What does it mean, Mister Potter?"

"Etir means 'door', ma'am," Harry said with a long-practiced, Dursley-perfect straight face. McGonnagall palmed her forehead for a moment, shaking her head slightly as she did so. She looked back to him, and said, "You have your mother's sense of humor." Her aura was...chucking?

"Really?"

"Indeed, Harry."

"I didn't know that. Would you...I mean, if you had time, ma'am, would you be willing to tell me what you remember of her? And my father?"

Minerva's gaze softened as she realized that perhaps he knew very little indeed about them, taken away after that awful night. She blinked several times to clear certain vivid memories, and then considered the boy before her. Lily Potter's eyes stared back at her, full of questions. Harry meanwhile observed the cat shaped energy-cloud around her pause, settle down, and drop its head onto its paws. Internally, Minerva sighed.

"I would be pleased to, Harry. The weekend would be best. Come find me on Sunday after breakfast."

"I will. Thank you, ma'am."

"Oh, and Mister Potter... I have observed your performance in class. It seems you have a knack for transfiguration, as your father did."

"I... did he?.....I suppose so, yes, ma'am."

"I haven't forgotten your...other results either, Harry. We can discuss those on Sunday as well."

"Yes, ma'am."

"That will do for now, Harry. Take this note, and be off with you," she said, handing over the note. Internally she was still a bit unnerved by Lilly's eyes looking so keenly at her once again, watching. They seemed to see everything.

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Potions that afternoon was...interesting. Harry had done his typical three-chapter read-ahead, in both texts as usual, but Snape had not called on him for a single question. Not one. The lecture period was as piquant as ever, but Lisa, Hermione and Hammond were his chosen victims today. All the while, Snape watched him like a hawk, and Harry subtly returned the favor. The practical period was well underway, with Harry and Ernie brewing together in good teamwork fashion, when a piercing alarm came from over Harry's left shoulder. He turned to see a red-faced Hermione glaring at an angry looking Severus Snape over the cauldron. A golden thread of magic connected them. Hermione covered her eyes, whimpered a plea that Harry thought was 'get out!'. Harry caught Ernie's glance and said, "excuse me, gotta go!"

Harry jukeed through the obstacle course of students and cauldrons to arrive at Hermione's side. She had collapsed to the her knees and was sobbing silently, hands over her eyes. A hufflepuff girl stood beside her, mystified. Snape glided away from the other side of the cauldron towards the front of the room.

"Hermione, it's Harry," he said, rubbing her back with one hand. One of her hands clutched for him, and he took it. "Come on, we're getting out of here." Harry wrapped an arm awkwardly around her waist and got on her feet, barely. He looked briefly to Kelly at the next cauldron and requested that she collect their books. With an arm still around her waist he guided her towards the door. Lisa had been watching events unfold since Harry's cross-room sprint, and saw Harry's brief, crook-fingered summons along with the worry in his glance. She handed her ladle to her partner, bid her good luck, and swung quickly into place at Hermione's other shoulder. The taller girl steered Hermione by the shoulders even as Harry did so by the waist.

Snape obviously saw them, but ignored them. The door, however, did not. Harry yanked on it, but the four or five-hundred year old oak door with hand-wrought hinges and locks refused to budge. Harry could see the handle and locks were charmed, but not the wood itself. There was no way in hell he was going to beg Snape to open the door for them. He needed a target for his boiling anger, and this bloody door had just volunteered. Heat, incandescent and raw, flared. A brief, brilliant gold light illuminated the corner of the room as Harry Potter melted the lock to molten slag in two seconds flat. The handle dropped away, deformed and useless. A radius of smoking, charred wood the size of a quaffle surrounded the hole once occupied by the lock. Harry shoved the door open, and the three of them left to the crunching of frost underfoot. Lisa took all of that in, but wisely said nothing. She steered them all towards the hospital wing.

The entire class was staring at the charred remains of the door. Murmurs and whispers abounded. A few twigged to the fact that Harry Potter hadn't used a wand to destroy the lock. "Back to work! All of you!" Snape's voice rang out. Distractedly, they did so. Some time after, Snape glided over to shut the door once more, only to find that impossible. He puzzled briefly at the thick frost on the threshold of the door, and the smoldering circle of charred oak where the lock formerly resided. Twisted, deformed bits of metal lay on the floor, barely recognizable as the handle and locks. Snape was begrudgingly impressed. The boy was not to be underestimated. To manage this, without a wand....he would have to review his memory of these events later to better understand what Potter actually did.

A short walk later found Harry and Lisa supporting a very emotional Hermione into the Hospital Wing. Madame Pomfrey scooted over to them, and directed them to place Hermione on the nearest bed. The three of them sat together, Hermione supported between her friends. Her sobbing had diminished over the walk, but when Pomfrey asked her what had happened she broke into tears once more, and fell sobbing into Lisa's shoulder. Harry was acutely aware of being completely out of his depth here. Nevertheless, he could give the facts as he knew them. He looked Pomfrey in the eye, and said clearly, "She was mind-raped. Legilimized against her will, Madame. This will. not. stand!"

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